

A qualitative investigation into the reasons why students exit from the first year of their programme and UCD



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Executive Summary

Participant profile and response rate

- A sample of N = 65 former students who withdrew from their programme in UCD in the academic year 2008/2009 were invited to take part in telephone interviews. From this cohort, n = 25 interviews were conducted – representing a 38% response rate.
- Most of the respondents were from Arts and Science. Other programmes represented were Social Science, Nursing, Commerce and Italian, Computer Science, Radiography, Physiotherapy, and Sports Science.
- N = 50 UCD Support Staff and N = 5 Peer Mentors were invited to take part in focus groups sessions: n = 26 staff and n = 4 Peer Mentors agreed to take part – representing a 56% response rate. Staff included Student Advisors, Programme Office Directors, School Office Administrators, Student Supports (Tierney Building), and Student Counselling Services. A member of the sports body in the university also participated in a face to face interview.

Student entry into UCD: Programme choice, academic preparedness, information and expectations

- Nearly all respondents (n = 22) were direct entry from Leaving Certificate. Others enrolled from other courses from other third level institutions or were mature students.
- For over three-quarters of respondents, the degree programme was not their first choice on the CAO application. For some, it was 6th, 7th 8th choice and sometimes seen as a route into their preferred choice. Larger degree programmes such as Arts and Science were favoured because of their broad approach and therefore, allowed students to keep options open.
- Most respondents did not know what they wanted to do, this was particularly so for those doing Arts or Science. A small number in professional degrees did know what programme they wanted, but did not get their preferred choice in the CAO application process. This particular group of respondents completed their first year in UCD and reapplied for their preferred choice through the CAO process.
- Main sources of information about programme and university choices were family and friends; other sources used were Open Days, the UCD Prospectus and website. A small number of respondents mentioned speaking with their school career guidance counsellors. UCD Staff and student supports indicated that many students do not research their course

enough when completing their CAO application. More preparation of students is required at pre-admission through greater links between second and third level education.

Student UCD experiences

Making the transition from second to third level

- Three-quarters of respondents said they were prepared for the size of UCD.
- Just one-fifth of the cohort group reported that UCD had provided a supportive environment when they started their degree programme.
- The majority of respondents saw themselves as having very little understanding of a university on entry to UCD.
- Nearly three-quarters of respondents lived at home and most commuted two hours per day. This impacted on respondents' motivation to attend lectures, particularly when they had only one or two lectures per day that were spread between early morning and late afternoon. These respondents felt that there were few activities on campus during the day for students while waiting between lectures.
- There was no explicit mention by respondents of a difference between 2nd and 3rd level, but a lack of work structure was raised as an issue for some respondents, particularly in creating and being responsible for their own learning. . Staff reported a lack of continuity between second and third level, and first year students do not recognise their responsibility to organise their work. Recommendations included the need to simplify Semester 1 Stage 1, to give students a clear structure and time to adapt academically and socially and to track students' progress in first year, especially those in large programmes.
- First year students have little time for adjustment between Leaving Certificate results and entry into their third level programme. Staff reported that it can be particularly difficult for students coming from rural areas to adjust to the urban environment and to the large student population. Recommendations included more preparation at pre-admission, and the need to extend the induction process beyond one week to facilitate greater social integration.

Academic difficulties

- Over half of Arts student respondents said the required Leaving Certificate points did not reflect the academic standard and workload required in the programme.

- Those from large programmes commented on a perceived distance between academics and students on account of class sizes. Consequently, respondents did not see themselves as having the opportunity to engage with the academic staff. Respondents did not report attending tutorials and some reported missing lectures and assignments. These results suggest lack of academic integration.
- Difficulties were experienced in subjects that respondents had not taken before in second level or had taken at pass level in second level. These included science and language modules.
- Respondents from broad degree programmes felt pressure and uncertainty about module choices. They did not use the system effectively to access module information and/or register on time to get their preferred options. None of them articulated confusion or lack of clarity regarding their overall programme structure.
- Similarly, staff responses identified particular problems for first year students who are faced with a lot of choices (e.g. in Arts), as a result of which some students who do not fully identify with subjects but take a wide range of unrelated modules. Students need more information about module structure/ content and less jargonised systems. Recommendations include the need for a career advisory role for first year students to assist with subject/module choices in large, broad based degree programmes.
- There should be more co-ordinated regarding assessments to ensure a Stage One students' workload is manageable.
- Building students' confidence was identified as a way of increasing student motivation and sense of identity with a particular module/programme. Students need more information on their performance and how this can be improved. Recommendations from staff included the need for a structured feedback system to enhance understanding of progress and offer mechanisms for contact with academic staff that is consistent within and across programmes.
- Given the prevalence of 'wrong subject choice' as a reason for withdrawal; Support Staff highlighted the need for more flexibility to transfer between programmes.

Social difficulties

- None of the respondents referred to having involvement in any organised social activities, clubs or societies, suggesting lack of social integration.

- Big class sizes and the overall large student population present difficulties to develop and maintain friendships. Social groups coming from second level often remain intact, making it difficult for some students to form new friendships.
- Concerns were expressed about the placement of first year students in their campus accommodation. Respondents reported homesickness, recalled being placed with students who were not first years and others who did not speak English as a first language.
- Timetable structures can prevent students from engaging in social activities, particularly sporting activities if students have classes in the late afternoon, impacting on their social integration into UCD.

Engagement with support services

- All respondents reported little, if any, engagement with any form of academic or personal support in the early stages of their first year.
- Explanations for not seeking support when running into problems included not knowing where/who to approach, and this was particularly so for students in large programmes.
- Peer mentors had very different numbers of students to deal with, depending on their programme. Recommendations included the need to set an optimum number of first year students per peer mentor that is consistent across programmes and reinforcing the importance of engaging with peer mentoring systems during the first year programme.
- Emphasis was placed on the need for small group activities to be continued throughout Year 1 rather than during the initial weeks only.
- Integrated linkages between the different support services and with academic staff would help identify at-risk students. This would require greater sharing of information within and between academic and support services.

The decision to withdraw

- Those whose only reason for withdrawing was not getting sufficient points for their desired course completed their 1st year and then withdrew.
- Over half of withdrawals had already considered an alternative plan or had one in place before withdrawing. These plans often involved speaking with friends and family; however, no respondents reported speaking with anyone within UCD at this time about their decision to

withdraw or about their alternative plans. Friends played an important role in providing support – with Support Staff indicating that students were more likely to speak with friends about leaving UCD.

- The financial implications of re-sitting examinations were only mentioned by two respondents.
- Most respondents did not seek to access support at this time as they had already reached the decision and were of the opinion that support would not be useful to them. However, respondents did feel it would have been beneficial to know about possible alternative courses. The need was identified for a support role that will provide students with information on the options available to them.
- Nearly half of respondents considered that UCD was not to blame for their reasons for withdrawal. Rather, these respondents felt it was their own problem. All said that, in hindsight, their chosen programme was not the right one for them and considered they had made the best decision in the circumstances.

The process of withdrawal

- For approximately half of the respondent group, their first encounter with supports was when they had made the decision to leave and were enquiring about the withdrawal process (at the student desk). The small proportion that did access Student Advisors recalled positive experiences, identifying the ability of advisors to relate to their situation.
- The process of withdrawing was described as ‘cold & callous’, ‘unnerving’, ‘too rapid’ and ‘too easy’. Respondents expressed disbelief at how quickly one could stop being a student.
- Support Staff identified the need for a clear process of withdrawal which includes face-to-face contact and private space to deal with students who become upset. Also, a formal policy is required on how to engage with students who do not formally withdraw; one approach could include a follow-up letter offering a meeting with staff, and worded in such a way as to provide supportive closure.

Post – withdrawal

- Some respondents were open to the possibility of returning to UCD in the future.

- Nearly three-quarters of respondent group had enrolled in an alternative course, most of which were different to their UCD programmes – highlighting the importance of ‘wrong subject choice’ as contributing to the reason for withdrawal.
- Other directions taken included parenthood, part-time work and study, and full time employment.

Introduction

Lasting engagement of students, particularly in the first year, is a fundamental strand of the UCD Education Strategy 2009-14, with its success based on key performance indicators, especially rates of retention of students in first year. The major 'Focus on First Year' project is currently exploring the development of the most effective curricular structures, assessment strategies and academic supports for first year students across all undergraduate programmes. Such initiatives need to be underpinned by clear evidence of why some students fail to engage in their studies to the end of their degree programme and what needs to be developed to address such retention issues. A quantitative based study was completed in 2008 by Blaney & Mulkeen (2008), focusing on student retention among UCD entrants between 1999 and 2007.

This study builds on Blaney and Mulkeen's study, using an in-depth, qualitative approach in order to gain greater understanding of the experiences of withdrawal. It presents new data by exploring in detail students' experiences, expectations and influences in applying to their chosen programme and to UCD; their initial experiences and whether or not their expectations were met; the process of making the decision to leave and who was involved; and the process and experience of actually leaving. Importantly, this study offered students who exited the opportunity to make recommendations about the supports needed for such students. New data is also presented from focus groups with Student Advisors, Student Health Services, Student Counselling Service, Programme Office Directors, Student Support (Tierney Building), School Office Administrators, and Peer Mentors. Their insights and recommendations complement and provide a holistic, rounded view of the experiences of exiting students and students who have withdrawn. The evidence gained from this study will inform current and future approaches to students' retention at institutional level.

Review of the Literature

Introduction

Research on student withdrawal from third level institutions in Ireland is quite recent. Eivers *et al.* (2002) identified two main reasons for this: the reasons for withdrawal were believed to be beyond the scope of the higher education provider, and secondly, the assumption that non-completion of third level programmes was to be expected. Over the past ten years, an increasing body of research has been conducted regarding withdrawal in the Institute of Technology sector (Healy *et al.* 1999; Morgan *et al.* 2000; Eivers *et al.* 2002; Costello, 2003) and the Irish universities (Morgan *et al.* 2001; Blaney and Mulkeen, 2008). Drawing on national and international studies, the following looks at the literature on the withdrawal of first year students from their degree programme. The key topics of

retention and attrition are explored, as well as the intent to withdraw and the actual process of withdrawal itself. The review concludes with a presentation of the main recommendations emerging from key studies.

Attrition rates and characteristics of students who withdraw

Research shows that attrition is highest in first year of university (Yorke & Longden, 2008; Mannan, 2007). The 2007 survey of UCD students found that of students who withdrew, 69% withdrew in first year: 25% of these before 1st February, 30% after first-year exams and 14% in between (Blaney & Mulkeen, 2008). Ireland has high proportion of people entering college and a high retention rate compared with many other countries. Statistics from 2004, for example, show that Ireland had a high retention rate at 83%. This was compared to 54% for the USA, 67% for Australia, and 78% for the UK (Van Stolk *et al.* 2007). In the past decade, UCD's retention rate has hovered around the national average, and compares favourably to TCD (Blaney & Mulkeen, 2008).

The aim of most studies reviewed was to describe the factors associated with early withdrawal, or in some cases, intent to withdraw. A review of these relevant studies show that certain characteristics are often associated with withdrawal and that difficulties arise from trying to locate one predominant contributing factor. However, it has been found that the more risk factors a student has, the greater the likelihood that they will consider withdrawing (Yorke & Longden, 2008).

Gender and age characteristics

Blaney and Mulkeen (2008) found that female students were more likely to withdraw, but that the difference between females and males was just one percentage point. Mixed results regarding gender differences were noted elsewhere. For example, research on student withdrawal in three Institutes of Technology recorded major gender differences, with more male students failing to complete their programme (Morgan *et al.* 2000) while a second, similar study observed no gender differences in rate of completion (Healy *et al.* 1999).

UK studies have found that males were more likely to withdraw early (Cameron *et al.* 2010; Yorke, 1999). In terms of age, Kevern *et al.* (1999) found that in the UK, younger students were less likely to continue, and withdrew earlier in their programme. Yorke & Longden, (2008) reported that older students tended to have different problems than students who had just left second level education. They were more likely to withdraw for social reasons, external to the university environment (such as family and financial obligations), whereas younger students were more likely to withdraw for school-related reasons. This is consistent with Blaney and Mulkeen's 2008 findings from a survey of students

with a median age of under 20 that issues relating to social integration and interaction with faculty and staff were among the top reasons for withdrawal. Yorke and Longden (2008) in their study of 7,000 also found that younger students had greater difficulties in choosing courses, and were more likely to be unhappy with their living and study environment, whereas, older students had greater financial problems and problems associated with the demands of part-time study and caring for dependents.

Economic characteristics, work and living arrangements

Hussey and Smith (2010) reported that lower socio-economic status, family educational attainment and pre-college education affected students' preparedness for university, their commitment to university and their career aspirations. Similar findings were reported by Quinn *et al.* (2005) who cited that non-completion was higher for students from lower ranked social classes. Related to this, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to cite financial reasons for withdrawal, whereas those from professional backgrounds cited class size, stress and workload as reasons for withdrawal (Yorke & Longden, 2008).

While financial difficulties seem to be mentioned less as a reason for withdrawing and were not among the top reasons given in the Blaney and Mulkeen's UCD survey, there are many related factors that are still problematic. Students from poorer backgrounds are often more debt-averse, perhaps due to differing expectations of the benefit of college education on future earnings (Bozick, 2007). Even if loans are available, lower-income students may choose to economize in different ways, such as living at home despite a long commute, or working during term time. In the UK, different authorities have different thresholds of how much paid work is too much (the UK Select Committee on Education and Employment says more than 12 hours per week, others say more than 20 hours per week), but it is agreed that those who live at home and work long hours are more likely to withdraw (Quinn *et al.* 2005). On the positive side, Bozick (2007) found that living in on-campus housing has a protective effect: students were less likely to withdraw regardless of their work status; a finding he speculates may be due to stronger relationships with faculty and peers.

Mixed results have been recorded on the impact of students' accommodation on withdrawal, with research showing that living at home as well as living away from home can contribute to the reasons for withdrawal.

Living at home and dealing with long commuting times often means that students have less time to engage academically and socially within the university (Astin, 1975). Blaney and Mulkeen (2008) observed that UCD students living in the counties surrounding Dublin showed high rates of non-completion; this particular cohort of students were not eligible for campus accommodation and

instead were likely to be commuting some distances. Other studies too, have linked the living situation of students with the decision to withdraw (Bozick, 2007). For those living at home with a long commute, travel to attend classes could be a burden, and they were less able to stay around after classes to socialize. This effect of the physical distance was more pronounced among students who did not already have friends at the university, and whose friends and family had less experience with higher education (Bozick, 2007). Some students living away from home had difficulties coping with unfamiliar environments and forming new friendship networks (Dep. of Children Education Lifelong Learning and Skills, Wales, 2009; Quinn *et al.* 2010).

Academic performance prior to university

Academic performance at second level may also provide an indicator of student completion at third level. Morgan *et al.* (2001) reported a clear relationship between Leaving Certificate grades and course completion in university. Similar results were found in the UCD study (Blaney and Mulkeen, 2008) with students achieving better grades more likely to complete their programme

Reasons for withdrawal – contributing factors

There is consensus in the literature that there is never a single reason for a student deciding to withdraw, but rather what Georg (2009) describes as a '*bundle of influences*'. Therefore, taking a '*mono-casual*' approach to identifying the reasons for withdrawal does little to explain the phenomenon (Georg, 2009). Many studies have grouped the range of influential factors. For example, Glogowska, Young, & Lockyer (2007) identified a set of 'pull' and 'push' factors that influence decisions about withdrawing. 'Pull' factors that prevent withdrawal are determination, commitment to a chosen profession, informal and formal support, whereas, 'push' factors included the challenges of academic work, other demands that cause additional burden, negative early experiences, financial strain, injury or illness, and lack of support. Though some of these factors are within the power of the university to address, other more personal factors such as injury or illness, or domestic issues, may be beyond the scope of the university (Perry *et al.* 2008). A German based, quantitative based study found that students who expressed intent of withdrawing were less certain of their ability to study, spent less time in class, were more likely to have paid work (but not financial troubles), were more likely to feel anonymous and find the number of students stressful, and reported a lack of ambition in their university programme (Georg, 2009). Heublein *et al.* (2003) identified problematic study conditions, problems with study motivation, family and financial problems, achievement problems, examination failure, and illness as major contributory factors to student withdrawal. In regard to college related issues, Martinez (1995) reported that compared to students who remained, students who withdraw were more likely to be dissatisfied with the '*suitability of their programme of study*',

‘the intrinsic interest of their course’, ‘timetabling issues’, ‘the overall quality of teaching’, ‘help and support received from teachers’ and ‘help in preparing to move on to a job or higher qualification’ (1995: 3).

The table below compares the top reasons for withdrawal from the Blaney and Mulkeen’s UCD survey (2008) with two influential UK studies (Yorke & Longden, 2008; Davies & Elias, 2003).

Blaney & Mulkeen (2008)	Yorke & Longden (2008)	Davies & Elias (2003)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wrong choice of programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor choice of programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wrong choice of programme • Wrong choice of institution
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor sense of community • Unfriendly environment • Didn’t know anyone/difficulty making friends • Size/scale of campus 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal problems (not clear if these are related to the university or outside)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of interaction with faculty/staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of contact with academic staff 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of personal commitment to study 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor teaching quality 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate academic progress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic difficulties
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial problems

This table shows that in all three studies, wrong choice of programme was an important contributing factor to withdrawal. The following explores in greater detail some of the core reasons presented in the table above.

Subject choice and degree programme as contributing to withdrawal

Differences are recorded in withdrawal rates from different degree programmes. Blaney and Mulkeen (2008) found Arts to have the highest attrition, while UK studies have found higher attrition in the faculties of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Quinn *et al.* 2005; Dep. of Children Education Lifelong Learning and Skills, Wales, 2009). Differences in student withdrawal across different subject areas has also been recorded in a number of German studies (Georg, 2009) with higher withdrawals found in the language and cultural disciplines in comparison to more professional programmes, such as medicine. Blaney and Mulkeen (2008) also noted that students entering university with lower Leaving Certificate points and weaker results in Mathematics and English were shown to withdraw before completion of their degree programme.

Most recent UK and Irish studies, including those discussed above, have found that poor choice of course is the major reason for withdrawal (also Christie, 2004; Quinn *et al.* 2005; Georg, 2009, Yorke, 1999). Wrong career choice is also cited in Australian studies (Andrew *et al.* 2008) and South African studies (Mashaba & Mhlongo, 1995). In the Australian example, this reason was particularly prominent among students who withdrew early in their programme (Andrew *et al.* 2008). It has been found that students often fail to understand the content, scope or depth of the course they selected, either through their own lack of research or misleading or insufficient information provided by the institution (Davies and Elias - as cited in Dep. of Children Education Lifelong Learning and Skills, Wales, 2009). Poor and at times, inadequate career guidance and insufficient understanding by some students about the academic demands of their course can lead to a wrong choice of course (Martinez, 1995). Lack of preparation is no doubt accentuated by students relying instead on friends' opinions and experiences to inform their choices and expectations rather than information available directly from university sources (James *et al.* 1999).

This lack of preparation resulted in expectations that were uninformed, with students experiencing a gap between their expectations and college experiences. Yorke (1999) reported that wrong course choice as a reason to withdraw was followed, by 'programme not what I expected' and 'institution not what I expected'. Hence, student preparation through a clearer understanding of the programme and learning requirements would benefit students' experiences in their first year (Rickinson & Rutherford, 1996).

Christie (2004) identified a poor fit with the institution as a problem for many who withdraw early: a majority of students reported intending to continue third-level studies in the future, but at a different institution. This has been supported by subsequent studies by Georg (2009) and Blaney and Mulkeen (2008) who also cited poor university and/or subject fit as a reason for withdrawal, over more personal reasons and influences. As a result of poor fit, student motivation lessened, and they became disengaged from their learning environment, spending less time in classes. However, Blaney and Mulkeen (2008) pointed out that though wrong course choice was a much cited reason given by students who have withdrawn, this did not necessarily provide an adequate overview of their full set of reasons. Indeed, the conclusions put forward by Georg (2009) suggested that the tendency and decision to withdraw can be influenced by personal attributes, though institutional and social measures aimed at effective integration can reduce this tendency. Cameron *et al.* (2010) found that students who withdrew later in their programme do so because of personal reasons outside of the remit of the university.

Financial reasons for withdrawal

Financial problems were low on the list of reasons for withdrawing in Blaney and Mulkeen's study, and Yorke and Longden, (2008) found financial difficulties of decreasing importance in 2008, in comparison to surveys from the 1990s. In contrast to financial reasons, lack of contact with academic staff was on the rise. Yorke and Longden (2008) speculated that this could be a reflection of changing expectations, rather than changing situations in the UK insofar as students assumed a level of financial difficulties, and in return had higher expectations about level of support from academic staff.

Academic and social reasons for withdrawal

Tinto's (1974) model of persistence focused on the importance of academic and social integration for improving student retention. The level of academic and social integration into the college environment can determine whether or not a student will withdraw (Mannan, 2007). Different authors described what Tinto calls 'academic integration' in different ways, but most agreed that all students are faced with a change from structured, interactive, student-focused teaching at secondary level, to more anonymous lectures without compulsory attendance along with the need for self-discipline and self-study at third level, and they have different levels of ability and aptitude to adapt to the change (Quinn *et al.* 2005; Georg, 2009; Dep. of Children Education Lifelong Learning and Skills, 2009; Cameron *et al.* 2010; Tinto, 2010). Most students are able to make the transition, whereas others struggle, and may not have the confidence to seek help when required.

Hussey and Smith (2010) identified the importance of transitions in knowledge, understanding and skills, autonomy, approaches to learning, social and cultural integration, and the student's self-concept. They argue that these transitions must form the basis of the design and delivery of higher education. Lowe and Cook (2003) argued that academic staff often fail to recognise the challenges first year students face with encountering, for example, the formal lecture, acquiring the necessary study skills, time and financial management, IT skills and project work. Academic isolation can be experienced by students as a result of the distance between students and academic staff, and what Read *et al.* (2003) describe as an unfamiliarity with the academic environment.

Yorke and Longden, (2008) found that over half of students who had academic difficulties in their first six months had considered withdrawal. Students may choose to withdraw if they are struggling to adapt to the academic demands, even if they have not actually failed any exams (Eikeland & Manger, 1992). These difficulties were compounded when students' academic expectations for their course were not met. Drawing on the experiences of nursing students, difficulties were often encountered as students tried to overcome their lack of academic preparedness and adjust to higher academic demands than expected (Andrew *et al.* 2008; Last & Fulbrook, 2003). Student motivation and

commitment to learning is central to building academic integration (Tinto, 1975) and therefore, non-academic engagement and absenteeism can be a sign that a student is struggling or at risk of withdrawal (Bean, 1986).

Making friends is an important part of having a positive first year experience (Yorke & Longden, 2008). Three of the most important reasons UCD students gave for leaving in their first year were related to difficulties in making friends and feeling part of the community (Blaney and Mulkeen, 2008). Two studies focusing on withdrawal of economically disadvantaged students, found that they were more likely to live at home to reduce costs and that they felt that living at home limited their social integration (Bozick, 2007; Quinn et al. 2005).

The impact of commuting on opportunities for social integration was referred to earlier in this literature review. Yorke (1999) found that social isolation can be an important factor in the decision to withdraw, especially in the first semester for first year students. There is evidence to suggest that student satisfaction, contact with friends, and with academic staff results in greater commitment to the university, reducing students' sense of isolation (Eivers, 2002; Astin, 1985). Martinez and Munday (1998) emphasise the potential of group activities and group cohesion in contributing to social integration and student retention.

Engagement with student support services

Appropriate supports play a mediating role in preventing students from withdrawing, however, this potential is undermined by firstly, a lack of supports being in place and secondly, such students were choosing not to engage with supports that are provided (Sutherland *et al.*, 2007). The Quinn *et al.* (2005) study of first-generation students from working class backgrounds found that over half said they were reluctant to approach faculty staff, while other students found the lecturers to be unavailable. Students could be aware of student services, but might not know what actual services were available that could be of help to them, or how they could benefit. Failing to gain academic support, such as attending mentoring sessions, was attributed as a reason for withdrawal (Colalillo, 2007), while dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching, and lack of interaction with academic staff was found to contribute to students feeling isolated in their academic environment (Blaney & Mulkeen, 2008; Yorke & Longden, 2008).

The Blaney and Mulkeen UCD survey asked for recommendations about what the university could have done to support students who withdrew. Approximately half stated there was nothing that UCD could have done, while 44% of 2005 and 31% of 2006 students offered suggestions. Most of these related to having no one to talk to and not knowing where to seek help, or not getting the support they

needed when they sought help. Others included a better tutoring and mentoring system, a better guidance system and more cooperative and communicative response when help was sought (2008: 63).

During the 2005/2006 academic year, of the UCD students who withdrew after 1st February of their first year, 60% (80 students) did not notify anyone that they were withdrawing, but failed to show up for exams (Blaney & Mulkeen, 2008). Last and Fullbrook (2003) reported similar findings in their study on student nurses – with only a small number of students completing exit forms and interviews when leaving their degree programme.

The decision making and process of withdrawal

Studies referred to in the literature review suggest that there are often multiple, related reasons and the decision process happens over time. In the past, some organizations such as the Further Education Collaboration Fund have attempted to record the ‘most important reason’, but this does not give an accurate picture of what is causing withdrawal and what an institution can do to address it (Martinez, 2001; Martinez & Munday, 1998). Nor does the decision take place at a moment of time. Rather, as Quinn *et al.* (2005) describe, it is often a process of the student ‘drifting’ away from their studies as they struggle with feelings of guilt and fear that they will be perceived as failures. During this time, students may also consider the costs and benefits of staying in their degree programme (Medway & Penney, 1994) and while feelings of guilt and failure may be prevalent for some, for others, withdrawing is regarded more positively (Martinez, 1995). Despite this notion of *drift*; once the decision is made, the learning institution has less likelihood of being able to reverse the decision to withdraw (Georg, 2009). During the 2005/2006 academic year, of UCD students who withdrew after 1st February of their first year, 60% (80 students) did not notify anyone that they were withdrawing, but failed to show up for exams (Blaney & Mulkeen, 2008). Last & Fullbrook, (2003) reported similar findings in their study on student nurses – with only a small number of students completing exit forms and interviews when leaving their degree programme. Notably, more than half of UCD students described their feelings as “relieved” rather than disappointed, frustrated or “nothing in particular” when asked how they felt after deciding to withdraw (Blaney & Mulkeen, 2008).

Universities need to acknowledge and facilitate exiting and re-entering as an acceptable process for some students (Dep. of Children Education Lifelong Learning and Skills, 2009). Students who intend to return to an institution can develop and file a formal re-entry plan before leaving, so that they are, in effect, taking a leave of absence rather than withdrawing. This gives the student a goal to work towards and can make them feel less distressed about ‘quitting’ (Park, 2011: 45). For other students,

withdrawing can be viewed positively. Indeed, Tinto (1987: 141) argued that if *'the leaver does not define his/her own behaviour as representing a form of failure, neither should the institution'*. Most working class students interviewed considered attendance at university a positive experience in their lives, even if they withdrew (Quinn *et al.* 2005).

Recommendations from the literature

Recommendations for improving retention have not all been tested (Cameron *et al.* 2010) indeed in many cases, it is not feasible to conduct a study that could demonstrate their impact. Therefore, instead of referring to 'best practice' for improving student retention, it is more realistic to speak of 'effective practice' (Tinto, 2010). Recommendations from the studies mentioned in this literature review are wide reaching. This may be reflective of the extent to which the decision to withdraw often draws on a number of contributing factors, rather than just one main issue.

Recommendations for preparing students for third level education

For many students who choose to leave, the problem is frequently one of fit (Georg, 2009; James *et al.* 2010). Once a student has chosen the wrong course or wrong institution, there is a limit to how much the institution can do to resolve the problem. Instead, it is necessary to act before choices are made, to assist students to make better choices, while informing their expectations so as to reduce the gap between student perceptions and expectations and the real nature and demands of the academic and social environment. This includes ensuring that students have all the information needed to make an informed choice (Yorke & Longden, 2008; Georg, 2009; Quinn *et al.* 2005) and assisting students clarify their objectives for third level education while matching their interests and aptitudes with particular programmes (James *et al.* 2010).

Blaney & Mulkeen (2008) conclude that students require more guidance to help them with their degree and module choices – this includes working closer with Guidance Counsellors at second level education. Other suggestions for preparing students include the *'introduction of 'taster' events and the provision of experience of self-directed learning'* (Dep. of Children, Education, Lifelong Learning & Skills, 2009; 48).

Recommendations for building a supportive environment

Tinto (2010) stresses that all support must be aligned to classes, providing students with the skills they need to succeed in the subjects causing difficulty, rather than providing more general support, such as counselling. If resources are limited, this type of linked support can focus on foundation courses on which future learning will build or on those courses with high failure rates (Tinto, 2010).

Tinto also states that students need to be actively engaged, particularly in actively learning with other students, for example working on group projects.

Martinez (1995: 6) suggests a series of recommendations aimed at improving student achievement and retention by enhancing the culture of support provided to first year students which included:

- establishing close relationships with students as well as closer assessment and attendance monitoring;
- ‘*target setting*’, ‘*formative assessment*’ and ‘*feedback*’
- the development of information provision around the curriculum framework for new students- i.e. ‘*structure of the college year and college week, balance of teaching and independent learning and appropriate curriculum offer*’;
- focusing on student motivation, including the development of a variety of mechanisms to improve it;

The period of induction should be used a time to help students in their transition into third level. A ‘Freshman Seminar’ is identified by Tinto (2010) as providing the opportunity to build academic social integration. This would involve sessions during orientation on the key elements of study skills, time management, use of resources such as the library, along with information available on support services, and how to access them. Similarly, Martinez (1995) highlights the need to focus on the early stages of learning and in particular, the process of induction and the initial period of social integration and group formations. The process could include the opportunity to blend group formation, provide information, organise hands-on activities, and have students undertake an initial assessment and involving them in some early work on study skills and course work (Martinez & Munday, 1998). Opportunities could also be provided for student to work together on group projects (Tinto, 2010).

The key areas for improvement include promoting a positive classroom experience, building educational and social inclusiveness, improving and supporting choice making, ensuring appropriate resources are available, and managing student expectations (Yorke & Longden, 2008; Tinto, 1994). The literature points to a number of ways that universities can prevent attrition, although few have been rigorously evaluated. Some are broad, such as the UK National Audit Office’s recommendations that third-level institutions i) get to know the students and understand them and ii) develop a more positive approach to retention activities (Dep. of Children, Education, Lifelong Learning & Skills, 2009). Given the difficulties surrounding the transition from second to third level, support provided

must aim to meet the needs of students around this time. In order to allow for a successful transition, the module content and load of incoming students should be given careful consideration (Hussey & Smith, 2010). During these transitions and throughout the academic year, all support must be aligned to classes, providing students with the skills they need to succeed in the subjects causing difficulty, rather than providing more general support such as counselling (Tinto, 2010; Hussey & Smith, 2010). If resources are limited, a type of linked support should focus on foundation courses, or on courses that have high failure rates (Tinto, 2010).

Acknowledging that students present with a range of personal characteristics that may influence their decision to withdraw, more emphasis should be placed on third level institutions trying to alleviate their potential impact (Zepke *et al.* 2010). This involves identifying 'at-risk' students, based on these characteristics during the initial stages of induction while monitoring these students as they progress during the academic year and overcome the difficulties associated with making the transition from second to third level (Hussey & Smith, 2010). Martinez (1995: 6) and James *et al.* (2010) stressed the importance of identifying at-risk or under-performing students in order to provide for student requirements in the form of additional learning support. Students need to be assessed frequently, at the very least by midterm, showing the relevant faculty who needs support, and what supports are needed and providing mandatory formal assistance for students having difficulties (Park, 2011). In order to do this, comprehensive data systems and ways of monitoring student subgroups is essential (James *et al.* 2010).

Given that student withdrawal is shown to be higher in the broader degree programmes such as Arts and the Sciences, more work is required to build a sense of identity and allegiance with these subjects (Georg, 2009). One way of identifying problems and potential solutions particular to an institution is to conduct exit interviews with all departing students. Blaney and Mulkeen (2008) suggest that, in their 2007 survey, this had begun in UCD.

Conclusion

This section of the report provided an overview of relevant national and international studies concerning the reasons why students withdraw from their degree programme. While it is difficult to describe the 'non-continuing student', the literature does point to some general characteristics that are more common among students who do not progress to their second year, and that are clearly related to reasons for withdrawal. These include socio-economic background, living arrangements and academic performance prior to third level entry. Evidence shows that a range of factors often contribute to the decision to withdraw from third level education: poor programme choice; poor fit with the programme

and institution; lack of preparation for third level education; difficulties in transitioning from second to third level; difficulties in academic and social integration; and poor engagement with supports. Recommendations highlight the necessity of promoting a culture of student care that centres on student preparation for selecting their degree programme, developing the attributes for independent learning, successful transitioning from 2nd to 3rd level, facilitating academic and social integration, and providing adequate support provision in line with specific student needs.

Study Methodology

Overview

This study utilised a qualitative research methodology. This respondent-centred approach provided in-depth understanding of why first year students decide to withdraw from their university programme. The approach taken in the study allowed for sensitivity and was flexible enough so that all factors contributing to students' experiences and decisions could be identified and considered. Qualitative methods employed in the study were:

- Structured telephone interviews with former students who had withdrawn either during their first year programme, or following completion of their first year exams (without proceeding to second year).
- Focus groups with key support roles (e.g. Student Advisors, Student Health Centre, Peer Mentors).

For former students, a structured interview guide was used which allowed the interviewer to explore the respondents' experiences when a student; the factors that led them to withdraw; and the student/academic and other supports they may have accessed to help them with this decision. Focus groups with representatives from student support services were conducted to further inform an understanding of the decision to withdraw from academic programmes.

Respondents and Sampling

In the academic year 2008/09, N = 224 students were identified as fitting the criteria for the research: students who withdrew during the first year of their programme, as well as students who withdrew following completion of their first year exams. Students who failed their end of year exams or who transferred to a different course in UCD were excluded from the study.

With the permission of the Registrar, this information was obtained from student withdrawal records which included name, programme and contact details. The student withdrawals were clustered

according to their exiting programme. A sample of 60 was then drawn, taking account of the size of programme in relation to the number of withdrawals. For programmes with less than 6 withdrawals, 1 was selected, for programmes with between 6 to 11 withdrawals, 2 were selected, while 3 each were drawn from programmes with 12 exiting students and the remainder taken from the largest programmes of Science and Arts. Within programmes, the sample was randomly selected. An additional 5 names from the 5 largest programmes were selected for the purposes of piloting the interview schedule.

Programme	No of Withdrawals	No. for Sample
Arts	102	22
Science	49	17
Engineering	12	3
Business	12	3
Agriculture	9	2
Social Science	7	2
Nursing	6	2
Law	4	1
Veterinary	3	1
Landscape & Architecture	3	1
Physiotherapy	3	1
Radiography	3	1
Animal Science	3	1
Business & Law	2	1
Sports Science	2	1
Health & Performance Science	2	1
Medicine	1	0
Biomed Sc	1	0

Totals	224	60
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The range of support staff was identified and a list containing contact information was compiled for the purpose of the research. These included student advisors, student health services, student counselling service, programme office directors, student support (Tierney Building) and school office administrators. Students recruited for the focus groups were peer mentors (names supplied by the Student Advisors) and the outgoing Students Union Officers.

Study Methods

Letters of invitation were sent to former students (for interviews – see Appendix 1) and to Support Staff (for focus groups – see Appendix 2) detailing the objectives of the study, key areas that would be explored during interview/focus groups, and what was required of respondent involvement. Potential respondents were also informed of the importance of consent and confidentiality, and were provided with a contact number for the researcher should they wish to avail of more information. Along with letters of invitation, UCD Support Staff also received a consent form and return envelope. The consent form included an undertaking that the respondents would treat the content of the focus group as confidential (see Appendix 2).

A project web page was developed and made available on-line. All potential respondents were informed of this in their letters of invitation. The web-page included an *Overview* of the study, the *Background* to the study, the study *Goals* and *Methods*, *Results*, and *Next Steps* – how the results would be used.

Structured interview topic guides and focus group topic guides were developed for former students, UCD staff and Peer Mentors, respectively (see Appendix 1 and 2). The interview topic guide for students who withdraw explored:

- Introductory questions on starting their course
- The initial period in UCD and the course – expectations and experiences
- Making the decision to leave university – process and who was involved
- Leaving university – process involved
- Recommendations for the improvement of support provision to students

The focus group topic guide for UCD staff and Peer Mentors was divided into the following sections:

- Introductory questions on their role as support providers
- Experiences in providing support to students in general
- Experiences in providing support to students who are thinking about leaving
- Recommendations for support roles, for UCD support provision, and for students who are considering withdrawal.

Procedure

The study received UCD Ethics permission in April 2011. Following this, letters of invitation were administered to N = 65 (study sample plus pilot) former students, N = 45 support staff members, N = 5 peer mentors and N = 5 Students Union Representatives. The collection of data took place over four months.

Following a two week period after the initial administration of the letter of invitation, former students were contacted by telephone by the researcher to ascertain their willingness to participate. A group of N = 5 potential respondents were contacted by telephone first, as these were identified for the piloting phase of the interview protocol. The purpose of the pilot was to assess the usefulness, relevancy and accessibility of the interview topic guide in gaining an understanding of students' reasons for withdrawing. All five respondents consented to participation and no changes were necessary to the interview protocol as a result of these interviews.

Not unexpectedly, some difficulties were encountered in recruiting respondents for interview. Firstly, n = 36 potential respondents spoken to indicated they were preparing for exams and expressed a wish to be contacted once their exams were complete. This added a number of weeks to the study procedure. Further, a change of address meant that some potential respondents had not received the original letter of invitation and a change in phone numbers meant that some potential respondents were not contactable by phone. In cases where potential respondents had not received the original letter of invitation, a second letter was sent. Overall, it took some time to reach the majority of potential respondents and confirm their willingness to participate. Difficulties in recruiting by telephone also included the following:

- Potential respondents not answering their phone;
- Potential respondents expressing their willingness to participate, then not answering their phone at the time agreed for the interview;

- A number of former students were either no longer living in Ireland or were working in another country for the summer period.

UCD staff and peer mentor consent forms were collected and consenting respondents were contacted to arrange a possible date for the focus group to take place. The web tool *Doodle* (www.doodle.com) provided a very useful scheduling tool in which respondents could indicate their availability across a number of dates. All focus groups took place on the UCD campus. The largest focus group comprised six members; the smallest comprising just two. In three cases, separate interviews were had with Support Staff that could not attend focus groups. Challenges encountered in recruiting staff for focus groups were few; some potential respondents reported being too busy to take part, noting the busy exam period at the time (April – May). In such cases, staff members either put forward an alternative respondent and/or provided comments to the study questions via email to the researcher.

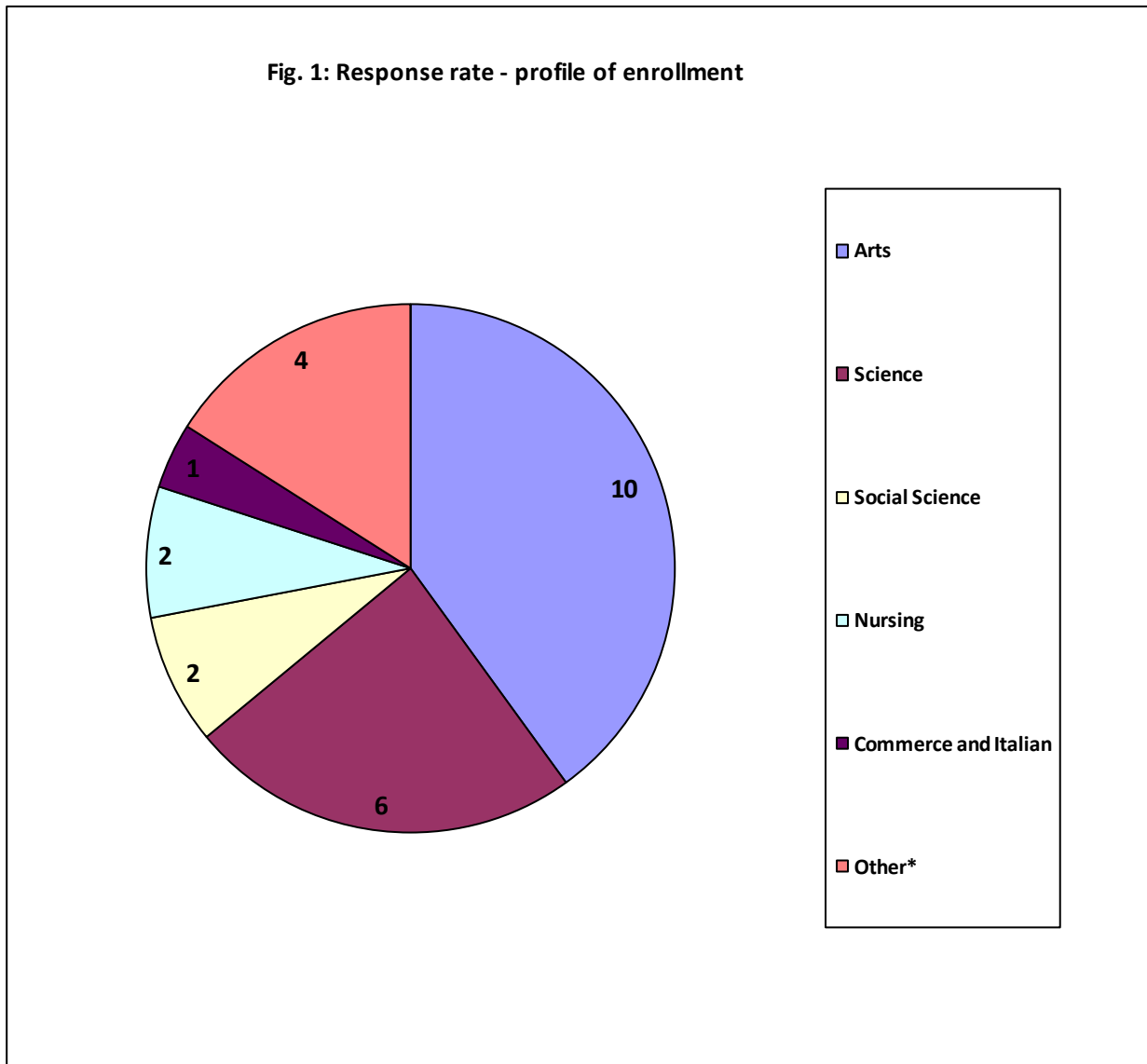
All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data. This involved the development of themes that reflected meaning in the data. A coding structure was developed and applied, reflecting the concepts and categories of meaning derived from the data.

Response rate for student respondents

The following presents details on the rate of response from cohort of students (N = 65) who withdrew in the academic year 2008/2009:

- n = 25 telephone interviews were completed – representing a 38% response rate. Interviews were conducted with n = 12 male and n = 13 females.
- n = 21 (9 male and 12 female) explicitly stated they did not want to take part.
- n = 7 agreed to participate; however, did not respond to follow up contact for interviewing;
- n = 5 were no longer living in Ireland. Contact numbers were provided in some of these cases; however, no success was achieved in reaching this group;
- n = 7 were not contactable, through mobile and landline phone numbers, and in n = 4 of these cases, the person was no longer living at the address.

Fig. 1 shows the profile of programmes enrolled in across the N = 25 respondent group.



* *Other* = Computer Science, Radiography, Physiotherapy, and Sports Science.

Most respondents were from the larger programmes of Arts and Science. Other courses represented were Social Science, Nursing, Commerce and Italian, Computer Science, Radiography, Physiotherapy, and Sports Science. Each respondents transcript was provided with a student code ID.

Current profile of respondents

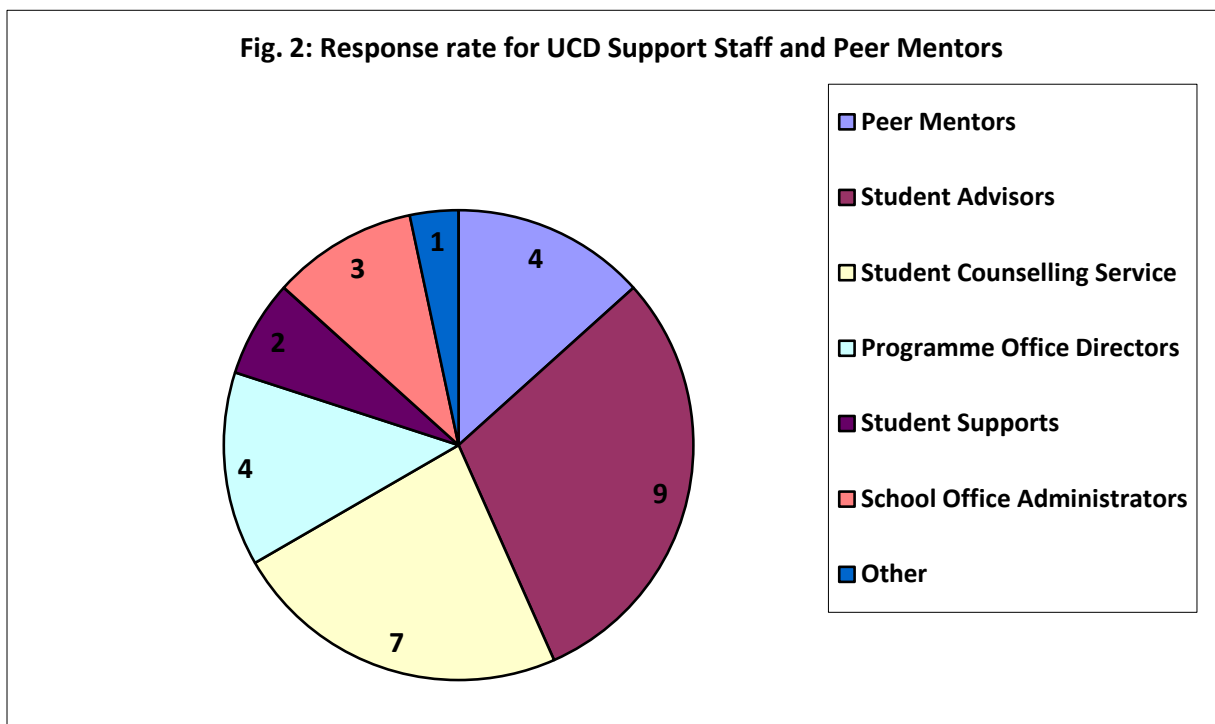
All respondents in this study withdrew from their programme and from UCD. None of the respondents had returned to complete a different programme in UCD since withdrawing: n = 16 respondents said they would consider returning to UCD as an option, while n = 6 said they were not sure and n = 2 stated that they would not return to UCD. Nearly three-quarters of the respondent group had enrolled in an alternative course most of which were considerably different than their UCD

course. In three cases, respondents subsequently withdrew from their new programme and were engaged in employment at the time of interview. Other directions taken by respondents included parenthood, part-time work and study, and full-time employment.

Response rate for UCD Support Staff and Peer Mentors

A total of N = 45 UCD Support Staff roles (engaging in the provision of support) were invited to take part in focus groups. These included n = 11 Student Advisors; n = 9 student health service providers; n = 7 student counsellor service providers; n = 7 Programme Office Directors; n = 2 student support members; n = 9 school office administrators. In addition, N = 5 Students' Union officers and N = 5 peer mentors were invited to take part. In one instance, a member of the university sports body expressed an interest in taking part and a face-to-face interview was conducted. A total of n = 26 UCD Support Staff and n = 4 Peer Mentors – (representing a 56% response rate) participated in seven focus groups sessions. In three cases, face-to-face interviews were conducted and in one case, written feedback was provided.

Fig. 2 shows the main roles represented in this part of the study.



Results - Contributing factors to the reasons for student withdrawal

Introduction

In line with the literature cited, the results show that the main reasons for withdrawal were related to the academic and social factors. The results show that there was no one main reason for withdrawal, but instead, for the majority of respondents, a number of factors combined to influence the first year student experience and the decision to withdraw.

Results are from interviews with n = 25 (38%) student respondents and n = 26 UCD Support Staff¹ and n = 4 Peer Mentors. The following themes are presented:

- ***Academic reasons for withdrawal*** – respondents’ academic preparedness, their experiences of academic integration and the academic difficulties encountered.
- ***Social reasons for withdrawal*** –the social factors contributing to respondents’ reasons for withdrawal – their experiences of social integration into UCD.
- ***Engagement with support services*** – respondents’ level of engagement with support services, their experiences of support and their needs as first year students, obstacles to seeking support.
- ***Withdrawing from UCD*** –the decision making process for respondents when thinking about withdrawing, the level of engagement with support services during this time, and the actual process of withdrawal.

Academic reasons for withdrawal

Academic preparedness: making the wrong subject choice

Nearly all the respondents (n = 22) entered UCD post Leaving Certificate. Three respondents entered either as first time mature students or having started courses in other institutions.

¹ The term **Support Staff** is used throughout the report as a broad term, encompassing all individual roles (such as Student Advisors, Programme Office Directors, Student Supports, etc.) that participated in focus groups. Whereas, Student Supports are a distinct category of support provision and therefore, are distinguished from the term Support Staff by reference to their location on the UCD campus - the Tierney Building.

All student respondents reported that in hindsight, the course was not the right course for them.

Wrong programme choice; not knowing what degree programme to do

For over three-quarters of the cohort, the degree programme in UCD was not the first choice on the CAO form; for some respondents, the programme was a 6th, 7th and 8th choice. This would explain the lack of information gathering and research on courses that were not first or second CAO preferences - as alluded to by this respondent: *'I didn't know much about the science course... it was the 4th choice on my CAO form'*. These results may also reflect issues about the completion of the CAO form process, with students having difficulties in identifying realistic and suitable course choices.

All student respondents reported that in hindsight, the course was not the right course for them and the evidence suggests that wrong subject choice was a major contributing factor to the reason for withdrawal. For most respondents, however, there was a general feeling of not knowing what to do at the time of CAO completion. This is particularly noted among students in broader programmes such as Arts and Science. This respondent cited family pressure in their decision to take a Science degree, *'though now looking back, I really didn't know that I wanted to do at the time... I thought it was a good idea at the time, to get a degree from UCD'*. Another explained that *'I didn't take my CAO seriously enough... I didn't really grasp what I was doing; I just kind of presumed I was doing Arts because it was the only points I was going to get'*.

Courses such as Arts and Science were regarded as providing a broad base degree from which respondents could specialise in specific fields of study during or after the degree programme, making these courses an appealing option for respondents who were not completely certain of their degree choice: *'I knew of the broad aspect of it, that it covered most areas... if hopefully, I figured out what I wanted to do properly, then it [Science degree] would give me more options'*, and *'I suppose I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, that's why I ended up doing Arts'*.

Chosen degree programme; a route into a preferred option

For some respondents, their programme was chosen to provide a route into a preferred course, for example this respondent explained that he done computer science, *'but really I was just trying to get into Arts'* and another respondent recalled that she *'never considered nursing as I really wanted to do midwifery but I felt I could get into this through nursing'*. In other cases, the programme taken in UCD offered similar subject choices to their preferred course. This student from the Commerce programme explained that, *'my first choice was Commerce, and I really wanted to do that...'*

Commerce and Italian was my 3rd choice and I got that' while a second student in Arts considered that 'Arts had the relevant subjects that I could do, as a career path into social science'.

The wrong programme; not receiving the required CAO points

Notably, for a small number of respondents in the professional degrees (such as radiography and physiotherapy) the issue was not lack of information or making the wrong CAO choice, they did not achieve the required Leaving Certificate points for their preferred choice. In three cases, medicine was the preferred option and was reapplied for through the HPAT (Health Professions Admission Test) system of entry, which was introduced in 2008. For this group, their reasons for withdrawal related to reapplying for their preferred option.

The views of UCD Support Staff and peer mentors on students making the wrong subject choice

The range of issues expressed by respondents was also identified by UCD Support Staff and Peer Mentors during the focus groups. Wrong subject choice was discussed by all focus group participants as a contributing factor to the decision to withdraw. Lack of student preparation and lack of information about courses were considered to be important contributing factors to wrong decisions being made.

Reasons for poor choice of course, as described by a Student Advisor included *'sixth year students not doing enough research into their course and you know, just not getting enough time – being swept up by the Leaving Certificate, how would they know what they'd want to do at that age'*. Peer Mentors identified the Leaving Certificate programme as not preparing students adequately enough for making specific future career decisions. First year students were recalled as saying *'I'm doing engineering and it's not what I wanted to do'* with this Peer Mentor commenting that *'the Leaving Certificate doesn't really gear them towards making a real choice... they [students] kind of come in here because they have the points, and they're delighted with the results of their Leaving Cert... and they find this is not really wanted to do'*.

Academic preparedness; lack of information and the impact of uninformed expectations

Lack of information about the degree programme

The main sources of information referred to were friends and family members who attended UCD, or family/friends who had taken similar course elsewhere. One respondent who had been enrolled in Nursing explained *'my partner's sister was studying nursing in [another university], so I spoke to her*

and she helped me make up my mind about accepting the nursing offer. I didn't speak to anyone in UCD, really just to friends only'. Another respondent commented that he had a friend in Arts and that he 'knew the subjects but I didn't know much about the modules and I really felt that the career office [in second level school] were not very helpful'. This respondent from Science explained that her 'brother's friend was doing her PhD and she had done science and I went into her... she told me about it and showed me the labs, talked me through what would happen'. Other sources of information included Open Days, reading the prospectus and the website information. Only a few respondents referred to guidance counsellors providing information on course details.

Despite sourcing some information, respondents recalled not knowing enough about their course prior to commencing in UCD, as a result, not having adequate information to realistically inform their expectations. For example, speaking about his social science programme, this student felt he 'didn't really know anything about the course before I started. There was information on the website and on the prospectus and I spoke to the career guidance teacher and she did talk about the course in the prospectus but I suppose there was only so much I could find out from her'. Respondents did not have enough information about the course in general and tended to use informal sources rather than the material provided in the prospectus, online and via guidance counsellors.,

Uninformed expectations about the degree programme

There is evidence to suggest respondents' generalised expectations about their course were not met. This respondent from Social Science indicated that he thought it would be 'a lot easier... especially in the [first] few months at least', but he went on to report that 'straight away, it was hard work, I had essays to do and assignments and I felt it was really full on, a lot more than expected'.. To take another example, this respondent, from Science, recalled that 'I knew a little bit about the course, or I done a little research, but it was a lot more science based then expected... practical's, experiments, and I'd no real idea what I was doing... [I had] just no idea of understanding the full picture of the course, of what it involved'.

Over half of the Arts programme respondents expressed the opinion that the required Leaving Certificate points for Arts did not reflect the academic demands and workload of this programme. In this example, the initial expectation of a relatively broad and academically accessible degree, reflective of the level of points required, was quickly extinguished by the realisation of having to deal with academically demanding subjects: 'you need to work hard, and keep your momentum going, and you have homework and responsibilities academically'. Lack of information and prior knowledge of course content contributed to uninformed expectations about what the course and university would be

like. Having realistic and informed expectations about their course may have better prepared respondents for their first year.

The views of UCD Support Staff and Peer Mentors on the unformed expectations of first year students

Student Advisors commented on student expectations about their programme and the extent to which these expectations fit with the reality of what students encounter in their first year. For example, this Student Advisor explained that students often expect an easy first year experience, following the academic demands of the Leaving Certificate programme: *‘[students] have done the Leaving Cert, they think they’ve done for life, and then they arrive in here and they think that this is an easy year. And they’re straight into exams in first year’*. A similar point was made by a Peer Mentor who recalled her own experiences of *‘being so focussed and drilled in the whole Leaving Cert thing... and then expecting a huge degree of freedom after that’* ... but in reality, *‘it’s very hard again right away’*. Result shows that first year students’ expectations are often different from the reality of their academic programme.

Academic integration; making the transition from second level to third level education

Difficulties in adjusting to a new learning structure

Academic difficulties were encountered because of what was described as a lack of learning structure (in comparison to second level) beyond what the individual respondent could create for themselves. This respondent in Science felt *‘I wasn’t mature enough to work on my own... I suppose more tutorials would have been helpful, but [only] if there was a big penalty if you didn’t go to them. I would have liked to have been pushed a bit more’*. These results may also reflect an inability of some students during their first year to develop and maintain (and be responsible) for their own learning structure.

Impact of commuting and timetabling on academic engagement

Opportunities for academic integration (through attendance at lectures and tutorials) were undermined by the living situation of some student respondents during their time in UCD. To begin with, location was an influential factor in respondents’ decision on where to attend university. UCD’s location was *‘handier than going to Cork, Galway, Limerick’*; *‘it was my nearest university’*; *‘it was easy to get to’*. Nearly three-quarters of the respondents lived at home during their time in UCD. For most, this was in the greater Dublin area, with a daily commute of up to one hour each way. In some cases, this average time increased on account of delays in public transport. Respondents recalled feeling less

motivated to attend lectures (with the long commute), especially, in instances where they had only one or two lectures per day. This respondent from Social Science, who took two buses, recalled that the commute was *'an hour and a half long. It was a lot for everyday and the lectures were toward the evening time, so it really was a very long day'*. Concerns were expressed about the timetabling of lectures, particularly in instances where there were long time periods between lectures.

This respondent in Arts explained that because of commuting, *'I couldn't integrate in any of the sport things... I had some one hour and two hour gaps... I suppose I felt there wasn't much to do on campus during this time'*. A second student from Arts recalled *'the one thing is that there were long gaps in the timetabling.... a lecture at nine and you wouldn't have the next lecture until two... I suppose you could go to the library if you wanted to'*. Another Arts student dealt with such gaps by opting for one lecture over another, *'if I went to the morning lecture, I wouldn't go to the evening one... or not to the morning one, but the evening one'*. Long commutes, long waiting periods between lectures and what was reported as a lack of socially oriented activities during the day undermined the motivation to attend lectures,

The views of UCD Support Staff and Peer Mentors on student difficulties in making the transition from second level to third level education

Lack of consistency and continuity between second and third level were raised by Programme Office Directors, Student Advisors, Student Supports (Tierney Building) and Peer Mentors as impacting on the ability of first year students to integrate academically. Unlike second level education, students in third level have more flexibility to decide their level of engagement with the academic environment. This Programme Office Director explained that some first year students have difficulties *'getting to grips with the fact that nobody is actually going to notice if you don't turn up for your 9 o'clock lecture. And it's up to you to actually do it. It's a very different environment and you have to tackle that...'* A Student Support (Tierney Building) staff member echoed these difficulties in adjusting to the new way of studying: *'it's much more your input'* and *'you're asked for an opinion which you probably weren't very much in secondary school'*.

The differences in levels of learning independence, learning styles, and academic requirements between second and third level present difficulties for some students in adapting to the university learning environment. The challenges involved in making the transition are often compounded by the new social environment of UCD, as described by a Programme Office Director, *'every programme has students from rural and urban areas. In agricultural science, we'd have a lot of students from the country and they are coming up, with no community and they're trying to transition from the school structure—that very structured environment, into this vast 23,000 students, and to get their head*

around that. Both Student Advisor and Peer Mentor groups commented on the short interval between students receiving Leaving Certificate results, confirming their university place, finding accommodation and then starting university, as described by a peer mentor, *'you got your results from the Leaving Cert, and then you get your accommodation for UCD the next day, and then moving into UCD, I think it's about 7 days afterwards. So there was no gap or reprise, you ended up living in Dublin in the space of 7 days'*.

Academic difficulties; module choice, workload and the impact of modularisation

Academic difficulties with new subjects

A respondent recalled speaking to his friends in Commerce that *'they were doing much more business work'*. Though he had expected the same from Commerce and Italian, this was not so, *'the Italian element just didn't help, there was too much emphasis on it and I never even really liked languages'*. Speaking about his Arts programme, this respondent explained that he liked Economics; but had difficulties with other subjects that he was required to take as part of the first year Arts programme: *'it was the electives that I didn't like, sociology and geography – geography wasn't what I expected and sociology, was one of the subjects I really didn't want to do, it just wasn't what I expected and I didn't really know what was going on'*.

Respondents reported difficulties in concentration and focus required as well as the pace of learning. Academic expectations suggest a presumed continuation or similarity in course material to that experienced in second level; however, difficulties arose in encountering new content and in class situations where there was mixed ability. This respondent from Arts who had taken Spanish at pass level for her Leaving Certificate explained that:

There was a lot of new stuff in Spanish that I didn't expect and I hadn't covered before and then other people in the class had more experience. I was the weakest, it was really embarrassing... there was a higher and beginner level, but there was nothing in the middle for people who had done it for their Leaving Cert.

Academic challenges were encountered in subjects that respondents had no prior experience of, or had taken at a pass level in their Leaving Certificate

Academic difficulties in making module choices

Difficulties were also encountered when making module choices. This respondent from the Science programme noted there were *'so many different ones[modules] to take, and to decide what to take... there was a lot of chemistry and biology and it was really very confusing for me to be honest'*.

Another respondent from the Arts programme recalled that she did not know she had to register for modules, and as a result, she did not get the options of her choice: *‘three of my friends all got into Arts and three of us dropped out before Christmas... we all wanted to do different courses but I think we were late registering because none of us got what we wanted’*. Despite some difficulties with module choice, very few respondents explicitly identified the structure of their degree programme as being problematic or causing confusion.

Respondents from broad degree programmes such as Science and Arts reported experiences of pressure and uncertainty when making module choices, often augmented by the absence of sufficient accessible information about the module content.

Academic disengagement

Academic disengagement and a loss of academic motivation were apparent in the student responses, primarily as a result of not being in their preferred course and experiencing academic difficulties. For example, this respondent stated that she *‘had no interest’* in the courses she was taking, because *‘I was majoring in statistics and it was so difficult because I had only done pass Maths in secondary school’* Another commented that *‘I was always a hard worker, and I am a hard worker, and it was the first time I realised that I wasn’t putting everything I need to put into it... and I realised I wasn’t enjoying it really, you had to be really interested in it to work on it’* , *‘it just got to a point where I was no longer motivated, struggling to get out of bed every morning, missing classes, falling asleep during lectures. There were missed assignments, missed lectures’*. For a few respondents, this academic disengagement translated into a sense of personal failure, as reflected in the following comment about withdrawing from Social Science: *‘I suppose I wanted it to work and I tried, but I was missing things, just losing interest and as much as I know it [withdrawing] was the right thing to do, you still can’t help but feel like a failure and I thought this of myself for a while’*. This statement highlights the need for specific supports to assist and support students when they are thinking about withdrawing. Academic disengagement was reflected in respondents failing to attend lectures and reporting a loss of interest and motivation.

The views of UCD Support Staff and Peer Mentors on student academic difficulties in taking new subjects

Earlier results outlined the views of focus group participants on the difficulties first year students’ encounter when making the transition from second to third level education. This point was reinforced by the comment from a Programme Office Director that students were:

coming in and they're taking chemistry that they've never studied in secondary, and they would have probably studied science to junior cert... But they have to contend now with physics, chemistry and biology. So it's a huge issue. They come in and say 'Oh my God'...

Difficulties arising for students taking new subjects at third level were also identified by Student Advisors and Peer Mentors. One Peer Mentor used the example of Sociology in the Arts programme, *'they wouldn't have studied it in school. So it's kind of getting used to the different subjects and the layout'*. In addition there was the need to adopt new learning styles, different to the 'learning by rote' approach often required of students at second level, *'it's a complete contrast with what you would have been in school, learning off Irish essays'*. UCD Support Staff and Peer Mentors noted the difficulties students can experience with new subjects as well as adjusting to the new demands of familiar subjects at third level.

The views of UCD Support Staff and Peer Mentors on the impact of a modularised academic structure on student experiences

Programme Office Directors, Student Supports (Tierney Building), School Office Administrators, Student Advisors and Student Counselling Service all commented on the negative impact of the academic year structure on first year students' learning and social experience. Firstly, Programme Office Directors, Student Supports (Tierney Building) and School Office Administrators identified the need to make more accessible the university's *'terminology, [the] regulations, [the] policy'* as these were *'too complicated and we expect far too much from them. Students are not familiar; they don't have a culture of modularisation'*. A School Office Administrator expressed confusion about the current system, stating that *'I just can't understand it. I don't know how a 17-18-19 year old can make sense of it. I don't understand it, knowing the systems in UCD'*. Programme Office Directors, Student Supports (Tierney Building) and Student Advisors particularly emphasised the impact of this in the larger programme where students have to make a number of choices, for example in relation to Arts:

the structures—for first year students—they're just overwhelming. It's actually a very bad system. And in their course, students for the most part are pre-registered to at least 8 modules. In Arts, the maximum that they are [automatically] registered for is four. So there are another 8 you have to find...

The modularised, credit accumulation structure of the degree programmes was described as causing increased academic pressure and confusion for students: *'straight away, and it's unrelenting'* (Student Counselling Services) especially during their initial months in UCD. Not all students get their preferred module choice.

In addition, due to the high level of demand for some subjects, not all first year Arts students are guaranteed their subject preference so that the process: *'becomes a scramble to find [preferred course choice]—and you end up with students taking eight different subjects'*. A second Programme Office Director referred to this as *'a race'* which also added stress to academic and Support Staff (Tierney Building) when dealing with students' concerns on accessing preferred modules, a point also raised by the Peer Mentors.

Related to this was the concern expressed by Support Staff (Programme Office Directors and Student Advisors) in larger degree programmes about the lack of student identity with their chosen subjects: *'the structure and the sense of belonging to a subject'*. Attempts to integrate into the new learning environment and learning identity were undermined by the many different and sometimes unrelated modules students could find themselves taking:

before modularisation, they identified with a subject area. You always said you were doing History and Greek and Roman, or English and History. Whereas now, you're talking in terms of credit blocks and favourite subjects, and students don't have the same sense of belonging...

Student Counselling Services elaborated further on comments made by Programme Office Directors explaining how the move from *'faculties and departments to the schools and programmes'* impacted on the sense of *'ownership and with it, responsibility'* for first year students. It was considered that the changes limited the opportunities for academic and Support Staff to develop closer relationships with students.

The ability to identify with a programme is important for student integration. Support staff believe this is undermined by large class sizes, student anonymity, and number/choice of modules. The Student Counselling Service and Student Advisors expressed concerns about the impact of large workloads and academic pressures early in a student's first academic year, coinciding with the challenges of integrating into all aspects of university life. The general view was that students should be allowed sufficient time during their initial weeks in first year to make the transition, academically and socially, rather than having to focus quite quickly on meeting the demands of assessments and examinations: *'it is such a difficult time for students anyway, that whole year is very demanding, and then the transition, and then straight into academic work. But they need that social time, that's what university is all about, to really engage in the wealth of the social. But to be honest, I feel we've lost that in UCD'*. Further, it was felt that the pressures of a *'highly focused academic environment'* may exacerbate existing health problems as well as contribute to the distress that first year students may be experiencing in making the transition to University. The academic demands of first year can result in

insufficient time to integrate academically and socially, or manage a successful transition between second and third level education.

Recommendations – Academic Integration

Recommendations from student respondents

Academic based recommendations for students when filling in their CAO forms indicated the need for:

- Students need to give more considered time to selecting their full list of CAO preferences. There should be improved linkages between second and third level, especially with guidance counsellors at second level, and more opportunities for second level students to attend *‘a real lecture... and to appreciate the difference between school and university’*.

More information for potential and incoming students on course details, module choice, expected workload, course and examination requirements should be available, so *‘that students know college isn’t a doss’* As described by one respondent, it is important: *‘... to lay out exactly [at the beginning of lectures] what will need to be done, essays and you’re going to have this amount of reading for this year ... and the next lecture... To lay down the ground rules, on day one’*. In the same vein, another respondent commented on the need for *‘more information about the course, what it entails in terms of the hours, what you will be doing.... It’s hard to get information about the timetable before you actually get into college.’*

Recommendations from UCD Support Staff and Peer Mentors

Programme Office Directors, Student Supports (Tierney Building) and Student Advisors called for more preparation of students at pre-admission stage, and when making the transition from second to third level. These would aim to adequately inform students and to clarify their expectations for the degree programme. Recommendations pertaining to these areas included:

- providing potential students with the opportunities to talk *‘to people in the college itself’* such as current students, graduates and academic staff;
- targeting transition year in second level education as an *‘opportunity to get them more information and get them in here and sitting in lecture theatres and actually experiencing what university is like’*;
- the benefits of the prospectus as a *‘marketing tool’* were outlined; however, it was also recommended that its content be *‘honest’* so as to inform realistic expectations, so *‘that they*

know they'll have to do three economics modules, one maths module, and [that] they are going to be difficult';

- Provision of *'more pre-admission advice'* and information on how to access course content, the structure of modularisation, and the academic requirements needed to progress to Stage 2 of the programme.

To help first year students make the transition to third level and make the best module choices, recommendations were to:

- Simplify Semester One to allow students adjust to the new learning environment, academically and socially: *'if semester one was simplified, with less choice ...then you could start opening up opportunities maybe in Semester Two. It's just too much'* (Student Counselling). Overall, it was seen that the *'first semester needs to be more about adapting to university learning and integrating socially into UCD as well'* (Student Advisors).
- Peer Mentors recommended that more information be available and seminars provided that focused on developing the students' academic skills during the first semester. Suggestions included a *'study skills workshop... so students would be more prepared for exams'*. In the example of Radiography, a Peer Mentor recommended *'the lecturers and professors maybe to just run through diagnostic imaging... to explain the continuous assessment'*.
- Student Supports (Tierney Building) and School Office Administrators called for more career guidance for first year students, linking module choices with career directions post-university, by helping students *'map out their degree plan from the beginning, so they can see where they're going'*.

On a similar note, the Student Advisors suggested the creation of a career advisory role to assist incoming first year students with their module choices, to have someone available to them that would say *'you've picked this, well, you're not going to be able to get a degree unless you do this and that'*.

Recommendations for retaining students who have made the wrong subject choice were:

- More flexible learning structures and opportunities (such as part-time learning), and more flexibility to transfer from one programme to another (within a given time period) and from one module to another: *'if there was a more standardised Semester One, where students could then move into another programme in Semester Two. I think there'd be a lot of students retained within UCD...'* (Student Supports Tierney Building).

- A similar recommendation was made by Student Counselling Services who suggested the need for the university to acknowledge that *'there needs to be sideways movement and different ways of moving around. And people putting the pause button on, taking a break, so that it doesn't have to be a failure experience'*.

Social reasons for withdrawal

Social preparedness; the impact of uninformed expectations

Respondents who attended school within the vicinity of the UCD campus recalled spending time on the campus during their second level education. Despite these experiences, the majority of respondents felt, on reflection, that they had no real understanding of the university: *'I went to the open day, and got the information that way but I didn't really have any experience of the place'*. When asked about what they expected UCD would be like, most respondents referred to the social aspect of being a UCD student, their expectations centring on opportunities to integrate socially and to make new friends. Over three-quarters of the respondents acknowledged that they also anticipated the experience of a big university environment, with a large student population.

Information about and experience of the university in general was obtained from attending open days, visiting friends on campus, and speaking with family members who had attended UCD. Results showed that the respondents had mixed experiences in UCD, with those from smaller programmes reflecting more positive social experiences. Unfavourable experiences were described in terms of feelings of isolation and anonymity.

Commenting on her Physiotherapy programme, one respondent noted that though UCD was *'big and a bit daunting... there was a good atmosphere and plenty to do, and I suppose this made it easier for me to meet new people'*. Other respondents reported similar expectations, but less favourable experiences, especially among those who entered the larger degree programmes. A respondent who withdrew from Arts explained *'it wasn't as friendly as I thought it would be ... A lot of people from home weren't in UCD, and I felt that people from the city schools didn't mix with other people, they tended to stay in the same groups from secondary school...'*. Another respondent, in this case enrolled in Nursing, recalled that she *'knew there would be lots of students but I found it really difficult. I didn't know anyone that came in from school, and I suppose I did meet a few in the class but it was difficult'*. A second respondent from Arts explained that it was *'harder to meet other people ... there might be people in one subject and not in another one'*. Statements such as these reflect the sense of isolation and anonymity experienced by some respondents, particularly those in larger programmes.

Social integration; undermining factors

Difficulties in forming friendships

Friendships were often maintained (and sometimes depended upon) those established during second level. An Arts programme respondent noted that her social comprised *'people from a school, and I*

didn't really make new friends, and when they were dropping out, and I wasn't going to go in on my own, so that influenced my decision [to withdraw]'. A respondent from Science recalled feeling '*so disappointed*' as a result of the social difficulties experienced in meeting new friends:

it's so big that you either kind of lose yourself, you just kind of revert back to what you know – your old friends – the likelihood of you having lunch with someone that you know, versus having to go find someone and make a new friend, and then make arrangements to meet up with them, it's like very difficult.

Difficulties were experienced in forming either new friendships outside of existing friendships, or in retaining existing friendship groups. Emphasis was placed on the need for smaller group-based activities that are continue throughout first year, rather than happening during the initial few weeks only.

For others without an existing social group, feelings of alienation and isolation were recalled, often accentuated by a lack of opportunities to get involved in activities because of commuting times. The desire to move out of existing friendships formed at second level, and form new friendships reflected the desire to separate from experiences in second level, and to create a new sense of independence and life direction (an expectation that some students may have of this particular life stage). Interestingly, no reference was made to actual participation in social activities, clubs or societies; which may be reflective of the respondents' overall lack of social engagement and integration.

The impact of the UCD environment on social integration

Living at home presented fewer opportunities for social integration; however, respondents who lived in campus accommodation did not necessarily report more opportunities for social inclusion, or engaging in more social activities. Instead, a sense of isolation and homesickness was conveyed. For example, one respondent explained that he did not like living in Dublin, and was homesick, which was added to by being '*unhappy with the accommodation... I felt it was run down and I was living with two foreign boys who didn't really speak much English, and I was only new so that was difficult to be honest*'.

The physical size of UCD and its large student population impacted negatively on social integration for some first year students who withdrew. Respondents described feelings of '*isolation*', alienation, and '*loneliness*'. The following recollection reflects the sense of panic felt by one respondent in the crowded environment of the Newman Building: '*I was waiting in the communal area on day, and it was just so crowded, I got really agitated and left straight away, I just went home and decided that it wasn't for me. The first day that I was there, I had a similar feeling, it was just really uncomfortable*'.

The views of UCD Support Staff and Peer Mentors on student difficulties in forming new friendships

Social integration difficulties were identified by Student Supports (Tierney Building), Student Advisors and Peer Mentors. A Student Advisor explained that *'people who come from some schools particularly, Dublin schools, come with big groups of friends. But then if you're from another area and you come in by yourself, it's really hard to make friends'*. To address this issue, it was recommended that more emphasis be placed on *'getting them [incoming first year students] into more social activities at the start of term, that will break up the groups that come in together and let other people into them'* (Student Advisors).

The views of UCD Support Staff and Peer Mentors on the impact of the UCD environment on social integration

Difficulties with social integration for first year students were by Peer Mentors and all UCD Support Staff during focus group discussions. Elaborating further on the negative impact of modularisation, Programme Office Directors, Student Advisors, Student Counselling Services and Student Supports (Tierney Building) explained how difficult it could be for students to maintain friendships across their many modules. One staff support member commented that:

Their friends don't come to UCD as students, so therefore they find it very difficult. And a lot of students, where there are issues, it's in Arts because they don't fit in very well. The classes are too big; they're picking too many modules and not meeting the same people all the time. So they get very lost.... Arts in UCD is a lonely place to be.... There aren't enough contacts, not enough social opportunities.

Large class sizes, module structure, and academic demands were identified as making it more difficult to form and to maintain friendships.

As emphasised by Student Counselling Services, the demands of assessments and study in the first semester and inflexible timetabling often prevented students from engaging in more social oriented events, such as sport and social clubs. For example, discussions with a GAA mentor revealed that the timetabling structure (lectures in the afternoon and late evening) often prevented students from engaging in sport opportunities, and the related social experiences: *'some of them just can't commit, because they've lectures in the evening, or they've lectures here and there, and they can't make friends through sport, through that way, you know, because it's all very demanding on them as well, academically'*.

A staff member remarked on the difficulties experienced for students coming from rural areas, first in adjusting to an urban location and then, to the large social environment of UCD. This point was also picked up by Student Counselling Services who referred to an *'identity issue'* for students coming from rural areas and having to adjust. Resulting outcomes for these students include *'loneliness and isolation... feeling very different from the more mainstream type of student'*.

Recommendations – social integration

Recommendations from UCD Support Staff and Peer Mentors

Recommendations for improving the social integration of first years included:

- A more structured introduction to UCD beyond the initial orientation, with the value of participating in this structured approach conveyed to incoming students.
- The importance of a more structured social support system was emphasised by all Support Staff and Peer Mentors. It was not possible to decipher from comments how this might differ from current Peer Mentoring programmes – which may suggest some lack of awareness is among staff regarding current support systems that are in place, such as Peer Mentoring.
- More opportunities for social interaction and integration beyond what is provided at Orientation week, particularly for students who are not living on campus accommodation, but may live *'in Sandymount or Dundrum or wherever, and they aren't meeting groups and they go home in the evening time and ... on their own'* (Student Supports).
- Development of initiatives targeting first year students in UCD accommodation, *'to help people make friends on campus'* (Peer Mentor)

Engagement with UCD support services

The level of engagement with support – respondent experiences

Just five respondents experienced the university as a supportive environment. In regard to additional supports required, N = 2 respondents reported having an ongoing illness during their time in UCD that added to their difficulties in integrating socially and academically. Only one of these considered getting in contact with the disability officer and regretted they had not done so. Another respondent reported becoming pregnant during her first year. Though there were other contributing factors, the cost of UCD crèche facilities as well as accommodation costs which were major factors in her decision to withdraw. She recalled *'I couldn't believe the cost of child care in UCD..... There was no way I could continue to study and not have time to work and then pay for child care. It needs to be*

more student oriented'. Regardless of their programme, most respondents reported very little engagement with the support services; either in seeking supports assistance with their academic work, or in adjusting to university life. Support roles that were mentioned by some respondents were Peer Mentors and Student Advisors.

The views and experiences of UCD Support Staff and Peer Mentors in providing support to first year students

Peer Mentors described their role in engaging with first year students during the initial weeks of Semester One. They explained the potential of their role in being able to relate to first year students and to share common experiences, *'because they know we're other students with similar problems'* especially when, for example, first year students are reluctant to seek support from Student Advisors. There were mixed levels of contact between Peer Mentors and first year students, linked to programme size. In the recently established peer mentoring scheme in Arts, Peer Mentors reported low attendance at organised meetings: *'I had ten [students] this year, and at the first meeting I met with four, and ... and the other six, they don't really reply to your text messages. So I don't even know what they're doing like'*. Individual contact between first year students and Peer Mentors, and between students and Student Advisors, usually took place around assessment and examination periods, with students seeking information on a wide range of issues such as photocopying and borrowing books from the library, advice on managing workloads, financial support, advice on assignments, and fitting in socially.

Recognising the limitations of their own roles, Peer Mentors identified the need for more active reaching out by Student Advisors to students who show little engagement with Peer Mentoring services, *'it's quite a difficult role. We can't really take our own role too far. We can only do it at a certain level. And if people don't want to turn up, they're not going to. You can't make people get involved... maybe the Student Advisors should kind of say to them that they should attend the meetings'*. Student Advisors reported mixed levels of engagement with first year students, ranging from smaller programmes having the resources and opportunities to facilitate meetings with all first years, to lesser levels of engagement reported in the larger programmes.

Similar results in terms of contact were apparent among Programme Office Directors, with the levels of engagement varying across programmes. For example, a Programme Office Director in a smaller programme described an integrated system of support linkages between Student Advisors and programme office staff, resulting in a high level of engagement with students. Structures in place to facilitate this engagement included introductions to the programme office during orientation so that

'they know where the programme office is', and social events (such as coffee mornings) involving academic staff, UCD Support Staff and first year students. On the other hand, a lower level of engagement between students and staff was reported in the larger programmes on account of lack of resources and large student numbers. Student Counselling Services reported that, in general, there was little contact with first year students. Results suggest there is greater contact with first year students in smaller degree programmes. This is facilitated by lower student numbers and more potential for contact between programme offices and other student support services.

Engaging with supports; undermining factors

Lack of information on availability of support

Explanations for not seeking support related to not knowing how to access support on offer: this was especially the case respondents in the larger degree programmes. For example, a respondent in Arts explained that she '*knew that UCD has services for support, but I felt it was hard to get in touch with people, it was confusing, where to go and who to see... ?*'. However, it was not just the larger programmes that this proved to be problematic. For example, a respondent from Social Science recalled that despite knowing of a mentoring programme: '*I wasn't too sure on what to do, who I should go to see if I had a problem*'. Another respondent, this time from Commerce indicated that he '*was thinking about leaving on first few days... I wanted to transfer to [a different university] but didn't know where to go or who to speak to about it*'.

The perceived distance between students, academic and support staff

Respondents reported that a perceived distance between the student and academic staff impacted on the extent to which they felt they could seek and avail of academic support. Class sizes and lack of accessible relationships between students and academic staff prevented students from seeking academic help. Many of the respondents indicated that more direct contact with academic staff would have been helpful.

Speaking about her experiences in Arts, this student felt '*Arts is just so broad, I'd much prefer a more intimate environment where we could have the chance to speak with staff in the lecture hall and discuss and ask questions...*'. Another commented: '*I would have liked a more personal approach; I didn't know anyone and I didn't have face to face contact*'. The following statement from an Arts student captured the sense of isolation and distress experienced, and reflected the specific needs of first year students.

It was just it was the courses that I was doing; they were all big lecture rooms. So no matter what was in it, it was bound to be impersonal... obviously there's

professors there and stuff to help you, in theory they're there, but practically like—And it sounds very stupid for me to say it, but I don't think that they are there at all for you... I didn't feel like I could ask any of them for help because I was just a tiny speck on the wall. There were like 2-300 students in the lectures during the five lectures a week. And I'm in [other university] now... the lecturers would say, if you need anything, just come to me.... I didn't hear that once in UCD. Not on my first day, and it was daunting, hugely daunting in those huge lecture rooms, with all the other students.

The need for closer relationships and more direct contact with academic staff may be reflective of the difficulties students encounter when making the transition from second level to third level education. Six respondents drew comparisons between the UCD academic environment and the university/college they were attending at the time of interview. Favourable emphasis was placed on the accessibility of academic staff in their current institution, made easier by smaller class sizes.

The perceived usefulness of support and the need for information

Respondents (nearly three – quarters) who knew about student supports felt they could not access them: *'it sounds very stupid for me to say it, but I don't think that they are there at all for you. I didn't feel like I could ask any of them for help because I was just a tiny speck on the wall'*. Referring to the relationship between student numbers and the wider support on offer, a respondent from Nursing remarked that *'it's difficult for Student Advisors to meet all of those students... sure, we were introduced to Peer Mentors, but they don't have time for everyone, considering there are just so many students'*. Though Peer Mentor and Student Advisor roles were described as being *helpful*, limitations were noted in their perceived ability to provide one-to-one support, because of the large student population.

Other respondents, who knew of existing supports, made the decision not to avail of them as they considered that those available would not be helpful for their own concerns and challenges. Citing wrong subject choice, this respondent explained that *'I spoke a little to the Student Advisor but to be honest, what could she do... I felt it was really my problem because I had made the wrong course decisions in the first place'*. Similarly another respondent, this time from Commerce commented: *'there was really nothing UCD could do. What could they do? I was in the wrong course and it was as simple as that'*. This view was commonly expressed by students who were generally unhappy with their course choice, and also, the small cohort of students (in the professional degrees) who did not receive sufficient points for their preferred options.

The views of UCD Support Staff and Peer Mentors on factors influencing student engagement

The impact of a large university environment

All UCD Support Staff groups and Peer Mentors discussed the impact of the UCD environment on the potential for closer relationships between first year students and academic staff. The distance between academia and first year students, according to Student Advisors and Programme Office Directors, is augmented by a failure, particularly, in the larger programmes, to have in place a structured feedback system on assessments and results.

Student Counselling Services, Student Advisors, and Programme Office Directors stressed the necessity of building student confidence, especially early on in their first academic year. The provision of feedback was regarded as an opportunity to achieve this, as well as providing face to face contact between first year students and academic staff. For example, this Student Advisor compares the second level class environment with third level, suggesting that students may expect more feedback based on their second level classroom experiences:

Students come from the secondary environment where they do their essays and get them back, and they're in a small group, with one-on-one feedback. But when they come into third level, they can be in Arts... and having assessments from week 3 or 4 on... they aren't going to get the one-on-one feedback, and they're in huge groups... They may end up with 30% and wonder—how did I go so wrong? I did very well in my Leaving Cert.; I don't know how to cope with this.

Opportunities to build closer relationships with academic staff are hampered by the increasing student-to- staff ratios in lecture theatres, tutorials and Peer Mentoring.

A Programme Office Director commented on the increasing size of tutorials: *'In the past we'd have tutorials with 8 to 10 students, but now you've small groups, maybe 25 minimum, or 30...'* . . . Expanding on this point, another Programme Office Director from a large programme *'we don't have the same staff-student ratios that we used to have. The numbers have increased over the last three to four years, with additional programmes and so on. So you do need the resources to be able to provide that kind of support. Particularly with such large numbers.'* Similar limitations in regard to size and resources were identified by Peer Mentors. In the Social Science programme, for example *'there's 20 Peer Mentors to roughly 150 students'*, whereas in Radiography, the ratio is five Peer mentors to 40 students. The issue of staff/student ratios was also raised by Student Counselling Services because the increasing size of tutorials not only impact on learning but also on the students' overall experience *'the place has got bigger and more anonymous and less connected'*.

Regardless of the resources and mechanisms available to the various programmes, challenges were identified in encouraging students to engage more in support services. These included making

students aware of their responsibility in actively engaging with academic and support services. Student Supports (Tierney Building) were of the opinion that though students have a responsibility to reach out, this is not necessarily understood by students as it differs from their experiences in second level education: *'it's up to you to actually do it. And approaching academics, because your teachers at school would have known who you were, and your case, but now it's up to you to kind of go up and say 'I don't understand this'*. However, Peer Mentors explained that first year students were less likely to seek support on personal matters *'from people in the University'*, with more emphasis placed more on friends and family for support.

The need to identify at-risk students

The necessity of identifying at-risk students was stressed by all focus group participants. Discussions with Programme Office Directors revealed differences in the initiatives and opportunities for interaction with first year students across the university. For example, Programme Office Director explained that they use a mid-term paper questionnaire with student assessments, to monitor performance and *'you might see some sort of trends coming out, and you might see that a particular module might be giving difficulty. And see how to engage them [students] in discussion and ... work with those students just to see what in the module can be reshaped'*. In other, larger programmes, the potential for such was undermined by a reported lack of resources and the challenges that exist in reaching out to a large student population. Overall, discussions with support roles emphasised the importance placed on the retention of students. Notably, closer relationships within the context of smaller environments were identified as a way of working towards preventing students from withdrawing – *'if we make the emphasis on student retention, well then it will have to be about that relationship – it's the key'* (Student Advisor).

Recommendations – Support provision

Recommendations from respondents

Respondents' recommendations related to:

- The need to continuously inform first year students of the availability of academic support throughout the academic year: *'continuous message of we are here for you – and keep reinforcing it the whole time.... Something along the lines that if you don't understand this and you can't stay back after lectures, well here's my office times and I'm always here, so that students know they can go there and there is someone to talk to'* (respondent from Arts).

- The need for a mid-term review, for example, one respondent recommending that *‘UCD should send out an email to ask students how they are half way through the year, as students don’t always want to ask for help’*.

Recommendations from UCD Support Staff and Peer Mentors

Programme Office Directors considered that the current modular system allowed for students to *drift* and often go unnoticed through the academic year.

- Students should be tracked during their first year, especially in the larger degree programmes such as Science and Arts. This would involve promoting a culture of observing all first year students to identify those who are struggling academically.

Recommendations from Counselling Support Services, Programme Office Directors, Student Supports (Tierney Building), and Student Advisors identified the need for greater coordination and integration between services. The importance of identifying ‘at-risk’ students before they actually withdraw from the system was emphasised.

- Student support services highlighted the need for *‘a quicker link between Student Advisors and Admissions, and all the different areas that we can kind of tie it all in together’* in identifying at-risk students (Student Advisors). This would also serve to support individual roles, such as those of Peer Mentors and Student Advisors who have the potential to relate to student experiences and have ‘on-the-ground’ contact with first year students.
- More information sharing between academics and UCD Support Staff, such as the development of ‘at-risk’ indicators and more open culture to identifying at-risk students.. Student Advisors and Student Counselling Services stressed the importance of reaching out to struggling students as early as possible as students who are struggling academically may disengage further academically and socially, as the academic year progressed. Identifying ‘at-risk’ students earlier in the year allowed more time to assist such students in making the right decisions.
- A Student Advisor recommended that identifying at-risk students and engaging with students *‘who have failed’* be *‘part of the [Student Advisor’s] job description’*. Student Counselling Services recommended the need for an early warning system and also for a more *‘aware university culture. Continued promotion of UCD support services as well as incentives for students to attend events, such as Peer Mentor meetings’*

- The incorporation of Peer Mentoring programmes into first year timetables in order to establish the importance and value of attending events for social and academic integration.
- The continuous promotion of counselling services (beyond the initial few weeks of first year) at first year level, so that students are aware of what is available and feel they can approach counselling services for support on personal issues.

Overall, suggestions pointed to the need for the development of a *culture of care* with students' welfare at its centre that spans the entire staff network.

Withdrawing from UCD

Making the decision to withdraw; time markers, alternative plans, and the emotional context

The impact of time markers in the academic year on the decision process

Specific time periods, such as end of semester exams, CAO application dates, and the financial consequences of withdrawing after a specific date (in January) were identified as influential markers in the decision to withdraw by both respondent, and staff groups. A respondent in Arts stated that *'loads of people I was in school with were on the same course as well, and a lot of them had dropped out... a lot of them did earlier, just before the Christmas exams. I did the first year exams and then I dropped out, there was no point in continuing'*. Referring again to Arts, another recalled

I thought about leaving, it was coming up to the midterm. I had linguistics and politics paper due in – and I didn't even feel that I needed to do them. I said, why am I doing these? So subconsciously, I had dropped out before I had even made the decision. And then, I was looking at options and I decided to repeat my Leaving Certificate in October.

Time markers and the academic requirements that accompany them, (such as assessments and examinations) provoked respondents into reflecting on their strengths and weaknesses in their course, and on their overall experiences in UCD.

Respondents whose only reason for withdrawing was because they did not get not enough CAO points for their preferred course, completed their end of year exams, *'so that at least the first year would not have been a waste'*. Over half of the other respondents, mostly from Arts and Science, withdrew around the Christmas exam period, the remainder after the end of year exams.

The financial implications of having to sit repeat exams were mentioned by Student Supports (Tierney Building) and School Office Administrators during focus groups, but only by two respondents as contributing, (among other reasons), to their decision to withdraw from UCD. The cut off date for the non-return of fees was mentioned throughout the focus groups as pertinent to the decision when to withdraw. However this was only identified as an issue by two respondents both of whom withdrew following the cut-off date. The key time points identified by Student Advisors and Student Supports (Tierney Building) were *'within the registration period, or the first six weeks, when they have to register'*, *'just before the first year exams at Christmas'* and again *'after first year'* (Student Supports – Tierney Building). The introduction of semester exams had resulted in later withdrawals, as students used the exam period as a time for self-reflection on their programme and UCD. This staff member explained *'there has been a slight shift in the time of leaving. People tended to leave earlier, but now with semester exams, I think they're hanging on until after semester exams, and then leaving'*.

Different time points were identified by various Student Advisors. For one, these were *'at the beginning of the year'* and *'more so at the beginning of the second semester with students wanting to leave'*. For another, the peak times were *'week 4-5-6'* while a third found a crisis point to be *'right before they do their Christmas exam'*. Student advisors noted their role in informing first year students about the *'academic and financial penalties'* of withdrawing at certain times. Student Advisors considered that at the later time points, students *'are not making proper informed decisions, it's a rushed decision based on panic and stress'*.

Student Counselling Services and Peer Mentors referred to the modular system as contributing to the sense of failure experienced by students who withdraw late. They report that some students often disengage quite early on, yet remain in the system and *'they'll turn up just before their summer exams, looking for help. Having had their head in the sands'* (Student Counselling Services).

The emphasis on making alternative plans prior to withdrawing

For almost three-quarters of the respondents, an alternative plan had been considered or set in place during the decision making process. Planning alternative options and finalising these plans played a key role in confirming the decision to withdraw.

For respondents who did not obtain enough points for their preferred courses and who had completed their end of year exams, this alternative plan involved reapplying through the CAO process or HPAT process. The final decision to leave was made when their place in a different course was confirmed. Drawing on one example, a respondent who withdrew from physiotherapy stated that: *'I applied to medicine before Christmas and I decided to actually leave when I got the offer; I think it was in*

August.... when I actually knew'. Interestingly, this respondent commented; 'I would have stayed in UCD if I hadn't have got the offer of the place'. Other respondents also engaged in prior planning, often without informing anyone within their degree programme (such as Student Supports). A respondent in Commerce explained that he visited his secondary school guidance counsellor and following this, 'reapplied in the CAO' ... I did all that and then I decided to leave UCD'.

The emotional aspect of withdrawal

Respondents' comments on their decision to withdraw from their programme and UCD reflected a range of emotions experienced. The decision to withdraw involved not only reflecting on experiences since entering UCD, but also required them to consider their future, if they remained in UCD or withdrew. Respondents recalled giving much consideration to remaining in a programme that was a negative experience for them. The thought of carrying 'on with a subject that I didn't like for three years' contributed to making an immediate decision: 'I was homesick and lost interest. I couldn't imagine being stuck there for four years. I think it was five or six weeks in, I started thinking about it. It was very early on and I felt that even if I do four years of study, I wouldn't even be guaranteed a job'.

The actual process of withdrawal was described as 'cold and callous', 'daunting', 'scary', 'unnerving', and students were 'quite anxious, quite stressed'. Respondents noted that these emotions were added to by the speed at which the respondent could move from being enrolled in UCD to being no longer being a student, with the process described as being 'easy'. The emotional effects and sense of isolation (as well as the need for support) around withdrawal are apparent in the following recollection of an Arts respondents' experience:

I was completely lost. I didn't know what I was doing. And walked up to this desk, signed my name on a piece of paper, and bam, now not a student.... I don't think you should just be able to sign your name on a form and like sign your whole third-level education away. I think they shouldn't make it more difficult, but to make it more supportive, so that if you do get someone like me, to come up—that you can go up to someone and you can talk it out, and they can encourage you..... Not try to keep you in, but to let you know what is going to happen.

The need for support at this stage was also reflected by a respondent from Nursing:

If students decide to leave, they have to make it more of a process, ye know get students to fill out a survey and speak to an advisor. But I guess for someone to actually question students as well... make sure they are making the right decision.

These experiences and viewpoints reflect a lack of engagement with supports when making the decision to withdraw, and during the process that follows. Just one respondent viewed their decision to withdraw in terms of personal failure. In hindsight, all respondents considered the decision to withdraw was the best decision for them.

Engagement with UCD Support Services when making the decision to withdraw

Respondents' experiences of engaging with support services when making the decision to withdraw

The main process recalled by most respondents was sending an email and then being directed to the Student Help Desk and the Student Advisor. All respondents recalled that they had completed a *form*. Most respondents reported low engagement with support services, not only during their time in their degree programme (as outlined above), but also when making the decision on whether or not to withdraw. Most respondents did not access support services when making the decision to withdraw. This was because they believed that there was very little support services could do to improve their circumstances or change their mind.

A respondent from Nursing explained that *'nothing could really change my mind about leaving, to be honest, so there was really no point talking to anyone about it'*. Interestingly, the opinion that *'UCD are not to blame, it was more my own problem'* was a viewpoint shared by nearly half the respondent cohort from both large and small programmes, despite some of these same respondents identifying unfavourable aspects of their programme and UCD that contributed to their decision to withdraw. Approximately half of respondents, mostly from Arts and Science, noted that their first encounter with any support role was when they had made the decision to leave and were enquiring about the withdrawal process: *'the first contact was when I went up to say that I was leaving. I sent in an email and I was told to go to the student desk to sort it out'*. Similarly, not all respondents knew who to speak to when making the decision. This respondent from Sports Science recalled how he withdrew informally, and did not know who to talk to:

I didn't talk to anyone in the university. I didn't go back for a while and I then sent an email to say that I was leaving. Think I sent it to student services or something. I suppose I didn't know who to ask for information about leaving or what I should do. I couldn't find it on the website or anything. Nothing there, so I done nothing. It would've been good to know who to go to.

Whereas, this respondent from Arts explained:

I didn't know anything about any supports. I researched just before I was dropping out, and I only went to see them really because my mom knew ... and

she got me in touch, essentially. [with the Student Advisor], I think that's her name.

In the small number of cases where support roles were accessed, there were favourable comments about the experience, such as meeting the Student Advisor. Respondents found that advisors could relate to their individual situation, and provide information on the various options available to them: *'they went through all the things with me and how to leave, and if I wanted to leave now and take it up again next year, the following year'*. Another described his Student Advisor, *'they were PhD student and not that much older, so I felt that they knew what I was going through. It was helpful knowing what I had to do and what options were there to me'*. It was not possible to associate any particular factor with why students decided to seek support; though a large proportion who did not engage with supports were from Science and Arts.

The call for more support when withdrawing; what do students require?

Recommendations from respondents call for more support, having someone to talk to when making the decision to leave and knowing what options are available to students who are thinking about withdrawing and who withdraw.

These recommendations even came from respondents who did not access any supports at the time, acknowledging that in hindsight, they would have liked to have discussed the decision to leave UCD. Evidence from the respondents pointed to feelings of confusion and a perceived lack of information on what specific support roles could offer: *'I didn't really speak to anyone because I knew that I wanted to leave... but for someone thinking about leaving, I think there needs to be 'is there anything we can help you with?', ye know, someone that ye could be able to meet face to face and talk through the issues'*. This indicated the need for a readily accessible support role for students who are considering withdrawing from their programme. Results also show, however, that some respondents knew of services available, but did not seek to access support. This respondent commented that *'I talked to friends and family but I didn't talk to anyone in UCD, I really felt that I had made up my mind. So, there was no point'*.

Friends played an important role, not only in supporting respondent decisions. Respondents often used their friends' experiences of university to relate and make sense of their own experiences. Both friends and family contributed to providing legitimacy to the decision to leave.

The views and experiences of UCD Support Staff and Peer Mentors on the process of student withdrawal

Some Student Advisors and Programme Office Directors mentioned that students were requested to complete an exist form and return student cards. Others reported that this was not the case, while in one programme; withdrawing students were obliged to seek a *'sign off by the Programme Office'*. Discussions with Support Staff (Tierney Building) revealed a level of uncertainty across the university about what is required of students who wish to withdraw. Results suggest the need for a common withdrawal policy across all university programmes.

Peer Mentors recalled very little contact with students' who were considering withdrawal. A Peer Mentor recalled that he knew of only one student who had withdrawn and this was retrospectively *'I had a mentee who dropped out of college, but I only found out after it, and I got a text saying, I'm not in college anymore'*. Another Peer Mentor explained *'you'd just kind of hear it after their announcement to leave'*. Peer Mentors were aware of students in their own classes who had withdrawn.

Student Advisors reported the highest level of contact and engagement with students thinking about withdrawing. Discussions with Student Supports (Tierney Building), School Office Administrators, Programme Office Directors, and Peer Mentors outlined the central role Student Advisors can play in providing support to first year students. Student Supports and Peer Mentors recalled referring students to Student Advisors and their Programme Office when students express their desire to withdraw, while Student Advisors sought assistance from Student Supports (Tierney Building) in cases where a student wanted to transfer to another programme.

The readiness of first year students to openly discuss the decision to withdraw was undermined by their lack of willingness to discuss personal issues, other than with friends. Also, while students were advised to speak with their Student Advisor about the decision to leave, this did not always happen and is not a required element of the withdrawal process. For example, this Programme Office Director explained:

as it stands ... students who want to withdraw from the university can send in an email, they don't have to fill out a form, they don't have to return their student card. They're advised to talk to the Student Advisor... I think [it should be] mandatory to speak to a Student Advisor before they make the decision.

The overall view was that Student Advisors could play a key role in the process to withdrawal through the provision of advice and support.

Student Supports (Tierney Building) discussed the phenomenon of students arriving at the support desk, recounting challenges, concerns, and behind these, the desire to withdraw: *'they'd come to the*

desk, and the next thing as well is tears or something and you think there's a lot more behind this query... because students might arrive to us in the first case, and we'd advise them to go to their Student Advisor'. UCD Support Staff also noted times of higher levels of contact with students 'at risk' of withdrawing. . For example, Student Supports reported high levels of contact with such first year students, 'during orientation and immediately afterwards, and in and around exam time. And again immediately after Christmas, semester margins, when they need advice, or if they come to us about re-sits...'. Particularly difficulties were encountered when students sought advice on areas that were not necessarily falling within the remit of the Support Staff, particularly in instances where students expressed their desire to withdraw and became emotionally upset in a very public environment.

Student Supports (Tierney Building) and Programme Office Directors reported that contact around withdrawal was mostly with students who had already made up their mind and had confirmed the decision to withdrawal. Concern was again expressed for those who did not engage with supports and who do not withdraw formally –as expressed by this Programme Office Director: *'students that don't come forward, they could be feeling shame or failure, that they weren't good enough academically, they got lost in the programme, and they just can't make that step to ask for help. Or admit defeat. They are the real at-risk group'*.

Not only was it felt necessary to engage with at-risk students as early as possible in the academic year, the importance of providing face to face support to students was stressed. One Programme Office Director, for example, described interventions used by her programme to engage with students who have decided to withdraw. She explained:

We have an exit interview, for students when they do decide to leave, when they come into the Programme Office and indicate their wish to withdraw from the programme. We speak to them obviously first, and then we offer them a Coordinator and a Student Advisor... we also ask them to consider transfer within the programme, obviously within the regulations..... if they actually call in, you've a much better change of retaining them, whereas if they phone in or that, or we email them and ask them to come in—they just want us to send them the form.

The need to engage with students who do not formally withdraw

Student Advisors, Programme Office Directors and Student Counselling Services also expressed concern about the emotional wellbeing of students who withdraw without notification. A Student Advisor explained that feelings of failure may prevent students from wanting to seek support or to engage further with UCD: *'these students may see themselves as complete failures, they jump into the*

decision to leave and that's it, they really want to get rid of their UCD experience'. Student Advisors, in particular, noted the challenges in trying to engage with students once they have withdrawn.

There was widespread consensus across staff supports that most students withdraw without informing any UCD personnel. Considerable concern was expressed about first year students who withdraw without notice, including the fact that many such students were not aware of the financial implications of their decision.

Questions were raised about the responsibility of UCD to reach out to these students, especially when they may not want any more contact from the university. For example, this Student Advisor commented: *'my heart really goes out to those students who just leave and don't tell anyone... I'm really not sure what our responsibility is with these students. I think we have a responsibility but how do you engage with them? You can't hound them, but yet I think we need to engage with them to determine the reason why they left and I suppose to also say that you know, UCD actually cares'*. Notably, all Support Staff identified with a sense of failure associated with student withdrawal from UCD. This feeling may be further augmented by lack of opportunity to engage with students who withdraw without any notification or engagement with support services. The development of a policy outlining what engagement should take place with students who have not formerly withdrawn was recommended. This point was supported by the apparent uncertainty among Support Staff about the current process for withdrawal.

Recommendations - the process of withdrawal

Recommendations from respondents on the process of withdrawal

Respondents who withdrew made the following recommendation about the process of withdrawal:

- Students thinking about withdrawal need to allow time for the decision process, and to research available options: *'students need to think about whether they're going to work, or travel, or do a different course – you know, look into the options and maybe switch within UCD'* (respondent from Arts)
- A more thorough process is needed for students who wish to withdraw, that would include discussing the decision with someone in a support role. This respondent from Social Science recommended *'a longer process, whereby you have to speak to someone, it would be beneficial'*. A respondent who withdrew from Radiography recommended that *'there could be more communication on how to leave - it's hard finding the right support, there could be leaflets'*.

- Offering flexible opportunities for students thinking about withdrawing was also raised, such as facilitating them to sit in on alternative programmes.
- Notably, only two respondents indicated the need for information on the fee structure and the financial consequences of withdrawing.

Recommendations from UCD Support Staff and Peer Mentors on the process of withdrawal

Recommendations for the process of withdrawal included:

- Having a specific space where a Student Advisor or Programme Office Director could speak in privacy with a student. This was available in one programme office; but, not in others because of a reported lack of resources.
- A similar recommendation was made by Student Supports (Tierney Building) on the need for a space within the administration building for staff to bring students who express the desire to withdraw and may be emotionally upset. Though the importance of the Student Advisor role was acknowledged, the Student Supports (Tierney Building) argued for a separate role, someone to meet with students and *'discuss it [the decision to withdraw] through with them, maybe somebody from the careers office... Why it didn't suit and to try to talk them through it. And see if there is some way that you could guide them into the future, what they might want to do'*. (Student Supports Tierney Building).
- There was general agreement on the need for an academic advisory role that would engage with withdrawing students in a compassionate manner, and to convey that *'this isn't really the end of the world... People who drop out of college can do very well'* (Student Counselling Services).
- The provision of clear and accessible information about the withdrawal process was considered essential. For example, it was suggested that a *'clear document'* be made available on the internet that would show students who are *'thinking of leaving, these are your options—the ways you can go. So that you can reapply. So it's very straightforward'* (Student Supports Tierney Building).
- The provision of information on the options available to students once they withdraw was recommended as a means of *– 'encouraging them to have as second plan and letting them know their options afterwards'* (Student Advisor).

- The need to engage with students who have already withdrawn was also raised and suggestions for this included sending out a letter to these students to clarify their reasons for withdrawal, and to convey a positive, supportive message from UCD.

Discussion and Recommendations

Introduction

This study presented results from N = 25 interviews with respondents who withdrew from their first year programme in 2008/09. This represented a 38% response rate of the N = 60 former students who were invited to take part in the study. Most of the respondents interviewed withdrew from the larger degree programmes, i.e. Arts (n = 10) and Science (n = 6). Other programmes represented included Social Science, Computer Science, Commerce and Italian, Sports Science, Nursing, Radiography, and Physiotherapy. Focus groups were conducted with N = 26 Support Staff (Programme Office Directors, Student Advisors, Student Counselling Services, Student Supports (Tierney Building) and School Administration Staff) and N = 4 Peer Mentors – representing a 60% response rate.

The following presents a summary and discussion of the results from interviews and focus groups.

The cohort of respondents could be classified into two groups (based on respondent and UCD staff responses): those students who did not know what they wanted to do, particularly so for those doing Arts or Science and the small number in the professional degrees that did know what they wanted, but did not get their preferred choice. These two groups had different educational trajectories: the first group showed uncertainty about their programme choice and lack of academic preparedness. For this group, academic and social difficulties were encountered, often leading to disengagement and then to the decision to withdraw. The second group were students who failed to get the points required for their preferred course and withdrew from professional programmes such as Physiotherapy and Radiography. This group continued their academic programme through first year and completed their first year exams, then reapplied for their preferred course and withdrew prior to the commencement of second year.. A common aspect to both groups was a low level of engagement with support services.

On the whole, results from this study were similar to those presented in the literature review, particularly in relation to student preparedness, academic and social integration and student experiences of support.

The following presents a summary and discussion of the results from interviews and focus groups.

Student's entry into UCD

The need for student preparation

Nearly all respondents (n = 22) were direct entry from Leaving Certificate and for over three-quarters, the degree programme was not their first choice (for some it was 6th, 7th 8th choice) and sometimes seen as a route into their preferred choice. Results show that the cohort of respondents can be classified into two groups: those students who did not know what they wanted to do, particularly so for those doing Arts or Science and the small number in the professional degrees that did know what they wanted, but did not get their preferred choice.

Results suggest that overall; most of this student cohort was unprepared for UCD. The main sources of information about programmes and university choices were family and friends, while other sources were Open Days, the UCD Prospectus and website. A small number mentioned input from career guidance counsellors in their second level education. The significance of friends and family as sources of information has implications for the perceptions and expectations that student form of degree programmes and the university experience (James *et al.* 1999). These perceptions and expectations may be out of line with the reality of the student experience and this gap between expectations and reality can contribute to student dissatisfaction (Yorke, 1999). The design and delivery of information on degree programmes, therefore, must take into account the social contexts of information about degree programme choices.

Lack of academic preparedness resulted from not having enough information about the course in general, and not having sufficient understanding of the content and structure of the chosen course (e.g. on the module framework). These results reflect the evidence from studies referred to in the literature review showing the extent to which lack of academic preparedness contributes to poor decision making about course choices, consequentially leading to a decision to withdraw. Subject choice was clearly central to issues surrounding student retention and attrition – this suggests that a considerable level of work is required of students before they enter their third level programme and of the university to inform potential students on the requirements and demands of their degree programmes. The importance of informed choice of programme cannot be overstated. Information sourced must be realistic and from reliable sources; information should be jargon free, accessible, and relevant for students (within the context of their learning environment). It is imperative that when embarking on their degree programme, students are as well informed as possible regarding content and course details. While Open Days and the Prospectus may offer a ‘thumb nail sketch’ of university life in general and of a programme in particular, it appeared that the quality of guidance at second level and

programme information available at the pre-university entry stage was largely a matter of chance for respondents.

Initiatives in Transition Year were identified by Student Supports (Tierney Building) and other recommendations pointed to the need to allow second level students to interact more with the university while making their CAO course choices. Programmes such as Science and Arts were often chosen because of their broad approach. Respondents in these programmes believed that more specific choices could be made at a later date, and by choosing these courses, they were leaving all options open. There was also the feeling among some respondents that the points for large programmes such as Arts were not reflective of the level of work required. Therefore, it is imperative that potential students are made aware of what these programmes are about, the career options they may lead to, and the level of academic commitment they require. A career advisory role was mentioned by staff as a way of improving the support provided to first year students, though this was more in the capacity of helping students who are thinking of withdrawing.

Student academic and social experiences of UCD

The need for an improved transition from second level to third level education

During focus groups, UCD Support Staff outlined the difficulties first year students' encounter when making the transition from second level to third level education. There were social and academic difficulties, the former relating to the new learning environment of a university. A number of academic difficulties were identified; these included having to take new subjects or taking known subjects but at a 3rd level, as well as having to adjust to new learning styles and the academic requirements of assignments and examinations. These difficulties were apparent in the responses of Peer Mentors and Student Advisors who noted that students often sought information, for example, on how to complete assignments, or to source books in the library. Concerns were expressed about the impact of modularisation on students' ability to integrate overall, on account of the ongoing academic pressures throughout the academic year.

The student respondents did not explicitly name difficulties with the transition from 2nd to 3rd level. The issues they raised were: commuting time (for those living at home); homesickness (for those living in campus accommodation); as well as the academic challenges of working on one's own initiative and taking responsible for their own learning structure. Other difficulties specifically related to the module learning structure were in forming and maintaining friendships across the various modules, and to making module choices.

As the first year is a priority time to ensure a smooth transition from 2nd to 3rd level, the first months are the period of greatest transition, and so extra support and vigilance is required during this time. Support should particularly be used on those who may be least prepared for the academic challenges. This requires systems in place for the early identification of students with difficulties.

Hussey and Smith (2010) discussed the challenges associated with making the transition from one educational level to another. These transitions take place in relation to knowledge, understanding and skills, autonomy, approaches to learning, social and cultural integration, and the student's self-concept. They argued that these transitions must form the basis of the design and delivery of higher education and programmes which must be flexible enough to take these transitions into account. As the first year is a priority time to ensure a smooth transition, extra support and vigilance is required during this period. Support should be provided in particular to those who are least prepared for the academic challenges, and there needs to be systems in place to identify students with difficulties as early as possible. Recommendations from the literature emphasise the potential of an effective induction process in preparing students, helping them make the transition and integrate socially and academically into the third level educational environment (Martinez, 1995; Martinez & Munday, 1998; Tinto, 2010). In this study, UCD staff commented unfavourably on what they regard as the demands of the modularised system on first year students. Recommendations included the need to simplify Semester One to allow students more time to integrate into the university environment. This would require a review of the size and number of modules offered to first year students, especially in the first stage of Semester One.

Student expectations and academic difficulties

Respondents were more prepared for the UCD environment than the academic demands of their programme. This was apparent in their expectations of what UCD would be like, with respondents identifying with the large physical environment and student population. Overall, three-quarters of the respondents considered themselves prepared for the size of UCD. In regard to their academic expectations, results showed that these expectations were not met with academic difficulties encountered in new subjects, or subjects that respondents had taken at pass level in their second level education, and expectations not being met in terms of the required workload. Respondents from broad degree programmes felt pressure and uncertainty about module choices, and did not use the system effectively to access module information and/or register on time to get preferred options; however, none showed a confusion or lack of clarity regarding the programme structure. Staff identified the particular problems for 1st year students who are faced with a lot of choices e.g. in Arts, and raised concerns about the inability of students to identify and form a sense of identity around a

particular programme, as a result of taking a wide range of modules. In light of these difficulties, recommendations were made for the creation of a career advisory role for 1st year students to assist them with subject/module choices.

The challenges of academic and social integration

The student 'drift' identified by Georg (2009) was evident in this cohort of respondents. Academic disengagement was very apparent in some statements quoted. This can be attributed to a generalised dissatisfaction, loss of interest, and the overall realisation of being in the wrong course. These variables are central to building academic integration (Tinto, 1975) and therefore, undoubtedly contributed to the decision to withdraw.

Most respondents were living at home during their time in UCD and identified the demands of commuting as contributing to their reasons for missing lectures and for not being able to engage with social activities. It is difficult to know if commuting contributed to loss of interest and lack of motivation (and resulting academic disengagement) or their general dissatisfaction was actually the most important factor in their decision not to attend lectures. Observing similar results in an earlier UCD study on withdrawal, Blaney and Mulkeen (2008) recommended that a bus services be expanded later into the evenings to facilitate academic and social participation. Regardless, the demands of commuting must be acknowledged and more consideration given to identify ways of integrating students who commute long distances, especially during the initial weeks of their first year when integration and a smooth transition between second and third level are so important.

Students living on campus did not report engagement with social activities either and difficulties were raised in relation to their accommodation placement. Backed up by the views of Student Supports, there is need to ensure that first year students are placed in accommodation that will contribute positively to their integration into university life. The challenges of social integration reported by respondents and UCD staff– related to the need to break down existing social groups that come from second level in the interests of helping new students to integrate and form new friendships. Though initiatives are in place, recommendations included the need to continue such initiatives and small group activities throughout the first year rather than focusing primarily on the initial weeks of the first semester.

The impact of financial difficulties

The literature includes consideration of socio-economic and demographic factors which influence academic engagement and rates of attrition. These include socio-economic status, family educational

attainment, and pre-college education as well as whether or not the student is engaged in paid work during their time in university. Though the financial consequences of re-sits were identified by a small number of respondents and UCD staff, no other reference was made to financial hardships or to the financial consequences of attending university. This is reflective of earlier findings from the 2008 Blaney & Mulkeen report on UCD retention as well as the suggestion by Yorke (2008) that financial factors are increasingly less of an influential factor in students' decision to withdraw. The majority of respondents in this study lived at home during their time in UCD. The lack of reference to financial difficulties may suggest that the financial burden was perhaps less for these respondents or that the decision was made to live at home because of financial limitations. No reference was made to part-time employment by respondents.

Student Engagement with support

The need for closer relationships between students and UCD staff

Yorke & Longden, (2008) noted a rise in dissatisfaction with the level of contact with academic staff. In this study, those from larger programmes, such as Arts and Science, commented on the distance between academics and students. Reasons given were the large lecture environments, perceived lack of access to academic staff and perceived lack of interest on the part of academic staff, all contributing to a reluctance on the part of some respondents to seeking support. Though respondents had expected a large physical environment, the experiences of those in the larger degree programmes show that they were not prepared for the large lecture attendances and too limited access to academic staff. Results suggest that these student needs and expectations may be informed by their experiences in the second level classroom where classes were smaller and assistance from teaching staff was more accessible. Interestingly attendance at tutorials was not identified by these respondents as mitigating the effects of large lecture sizes nor did they mention seeking academic assistance. Therefore, the level of attempted engagement with academic supports was evident. This point was supported by the views and experiences of Peer Mentors who reported poor and irregular contact with some first year mentees.

Students need information on their performance and how this can be improved. The literature outlined the role that student feedback can have in forming closer relationships with academic and support staff. In this study, a structured feedback system was identified as having the potential to offer a mechanism for contact with academic staff, enhance understanding of student progress, and build student motivation and confidence. A structured feedback system can offer a mechanism for contact with academic staff and enhance understanding of student progress. However, according to the findings, feedback was not always available or was delayed. Students did not always make it their

own responsibility to seek feedback. Considering respondents' experiences and their needs, particularly in the larger programmes, it is important that greater effort is made to develop more personal relationships with students to maximise retention rates in Stage One. . The benefit of support roles, such as Peer Mentors and Student Advisors was apparent in the results for those who utilised the supports on offer.

Barriers to seeking and providing support

Similar to results in the literature review studies, mixed experiences were noted in respondents' recollections of engaging with support: some respondents were aware of supports, but did not engage while others admitted that they were not aware of support available. Respondent explanations for not seeking support when encountering problems included not knowing where and/or who to approach. This was particularly so for respondents in large programmes. Also, respondents questioned the ability/relevance of supports to address their concerns. Findings from UCD Support Staff respondents complemented the experiences and views of the student respondents. The importance of forming relationships with first year students was stressed and discussions revealed that in some Programme Offices, initiatives were in place to build a more intimate student environment. Different approaches across programmes to developing relationships between UCD staff and first year students were apparent. In one programme, these initiatives included introducing students to the programme office, social events between academic staff and students, and mid-term questionnaires. The ability to reach out to first year students in the larger programmes was hampered by resource issues and challenges of reaching out to a large student population. Peer Mentors believed that a more compulsory based approach was required to ensure that students realise the importance of maximise existing academic supports, such as tutorials. It was noted in the larger programmes, tutor-student ratios often mean that students did not receive the level of support that some may require. Peer mentors also had very different numbers of students to deal with, depending on the programme. The need to set an optimum number for an effective peer mentoring system and incorporate it into the Stage One programme was evident.

In order to ensure a student's workload is manageable, the need for a more co-ordinated assessment approach was evident.

The responsibility of students to actively seek support was discussed by Support Staff; however, results from respondents suggest that though closer academic support is required, friends and family often play a more central role in providing support in relation to withdrawal. This point may explain the varying levels of engagement with supports such as Peer Mentors. In supporting students in their academic and social integration into university life, initiatives should aim to build a culture of student

responsibility whereby students use their own initiative to seek support and access existing support structures, rather than waiting to be approached. This requires, however, level students, as well as a supportive structure than educates students around the provision of support and promotes the various supports available.

The importance of identifying at-risk students

The literature review outlined the research evidence which suggests that characteristics such as socio-economic background, living situations, and academic performance, can impact on whether or not a student withdraws. The literature also emphasises the importance of identifying at-risk students and those who are struggling academically and socially, before the decision to withdraw is made. In this study, the need to identify ‘at-risk’ students before they make the decision to withdraw was stressed by UCD Support Staff. Results show that living arrangements did impact on students’ integration and participation in UCD. Difficulties were most prevalent in the larger degree programmes such as Arts and Science, similar to evidence outlined in the literature on the prevalence of withdrawal from degree programmes in the Humanities. In this study, these programmes were shown to have more difficulties in engaging with students, as a result of large student populations. Respondents who decided to enrol in these programmes often based their decision on the belief that programmes such as Arts provided a broad avenue which allowed students to keep their options open. These respondents did not really know what they wanted to do post Leaving Certificate. These results highlight the particular need to identify and monitor ‘at-risk’ students in the larger degree programmes; as such students may be uncertain of their educational path, and less prepared academically for university.

Student support respondents emphasised the need to identify at-risk students or students who are struggling before they make the decision to withdraw. In some programmes, mid-term questionnaires were used for the purpose of gaining student feedback while identifying struggling students; however, challenges were noted in sharing information on students across programmes and in building a joint-up system of support. James *et al.* (2010) indicated the importance of a university having in place a comprehensive data system and a way of monitoring subgroups of students.

Results suggest not only the need for a common policy across the university on how best to deal with students thinking about withdrawing, but also the need for a coordinated system of care between support services. As highlighted by Student Counselling Services, this starts with a culture of care embedded throughout the university, incorporating all staff and students. A more coordinated approach to assisting students who are struggling involves improved information-sharing between academia and support services, and greater linkages within support services. Additionally,

recommendations included the need for a more co-ordinated approach between programmes regarding assessments, to ensure a student's workload is manageable. Ways of overcoming resource limitations need to be explored, and these may include sharing of resources while looking to the various programmes within UCD and exploring the range of initiatives that are already in place.

Time markers were identified by both respondent and Support Staff groups as important factors impacting on the decision to withdraw. These were dates such as mid-semester assignment due dates, and examinations at the end of the 1st and 2nd semesters. Bearing in mind that these markers can influence the decision to withdraw, they could also be used as opportunities to engage with students who may show signs of struggling. Further, these markers could be used to promote specific services, such as student advisors, given that level of contact between first year students and supports was often higher at such times.

The process of withdrawal from UCD

The prevalence of wrong course choice as a reason for withdrawal

Mirroring the results of Blaney and Mulkeen's UCD study (2008), wrong course choice seemed a predominant factor in students' reasons for withdrawal from UCD in this study. The rich, qualitative insights from this study show however, that this was in addition to a range of experiences, including; lack of information; expectations not reflective of the reality of their university experience; lack of academic preparedness; difficulties with social integration; dissatisfaction with academic support; and lack of contact with support services. Reiterating the views of Georg (2009), the reasons for withdrawal cannot be attributed to one single factor, but are subject to an array of influences. All respondents in this study said that in hindsight, this was not the right course for them and considered the decision to withdraw the best one. All respondents had withdrawn from UCD, rather than trying to enrol in a different programme within the university. This suggests not only wrong course, but also difficulties in adapting to the UCD environment. As clearly evident from the literature review and staff responses, where it is a matter of wrong choice of course, more flexible learning structures are needed that allow for students to change and transfer between programmes, providing they have the requisite entry requirements.

The process of withdrawal and engagement with support

At the time of interviews, students thinking about withdrawal were not required to speak to a student advisor or visit their Programme Office, while staff expressed uncertainty on the actual process that is required by students when withdrawing. In fact, comments from UCD staff suggest that a considerable number of students withdraw without any formal notification – and this was evident in

the recollections of respondents. For approximately half of the respondent cohort, their first encounter with supports was when they had made the decision to leave and were enquiring about the withdrawal process (at the student desk). The small proportion who did access student advisors commented positively on the experiences, citing their ability to understand their concerns. The process of making the decision to withdraw involved a confusing collection of emotions where reasoned judgments and considered evaluations struggled against anxiety. It was during this process that advice and guidance from Support Staff was sought by some students – but it is not always clear to them who to approach or where to avail of such support - whilst others, who may have decided to leave, do not seek any type of advice or guidance because of ‘having made up their mind’. The perceived usefulness of support impacts on whether or not students seek to avail of them. Students may be fearful that by engaging with support, they will feel pressurised to review or change their decision to withdraw. Feelings of failure were not prevalent in the responses of former students involved in this study. Notably, however, those who responded had all given notification about withdrawal; those students who withdrew without any notice may have had more negative feelings (a possible reason for not withdrawing formally).

All students in this study completed an *exit form*; however, staff expressed considerable concern on those students who do not notify UCD on their decision to leave their programme. Results show the need for a clear process of withdrawal which includes some face-to-face contact and private space to deal with students who become upset. Also, a formal policy common to all programmes is required on engagement with students who do not formally withdraw - such an approach could include a follow-up letter offering a meeting with UCD staff to discuss experiences and reasons for withdrawal, and should be worded in such a way to provide supportive closure.

The need for support when withdrawing

Overall, little engagement with supports was reported and, for those who withdrew formally, the process of withdrawing was described as ‘cold & callous’, ‘unnerving’, ‘too rapid’ and ‘too easy’. Almost in contrast to their experiences, recommendations from respondents were for more information on the alternatives available to them, and opportunities to speak to someone within the university about their decision to withdraw. While students who express thoughts about withdrawing are referred to a Student Advisor and the relevant Programme Office, support Staff indicated that they mostly come into contact with such students when the decision is already made. Also, a tracking or more mandatory system may be required to ensure that students who go to Student Supports (Tierney Building) wanting to withdraw actually speak with Student Advisors and approach their Programme Office.

Gaps in support provision or in the line of support referral (between Student Supports and Student Advisor, for example), may mean that some students fall through the support network, or decide not to avail of any support. Though discussions with staff suggest that some support linkages are in place, the need for greater coordination in identifying 'at-risk' students, improved linkages and sharing of student information between academic and UCD Support Staff was evident. Also, front-line staff may require training in providing initial support to students who become emotionally upset when they approach Student Supports (Tierney Building) with the intention of withdrawing.

The literature review found that students who withdrew recalled feelings of failure. This point was raised by the Student Counselling Services who expressed concern about the emotional wellbeing of students who withdraw, especially those who withdraw without any formal notification. In this study, student respondents acknowledged that though the process was daunting, the decision to withdraw was the best for them. Having a plan in place after withdrawal no doubt prevented these respondents from identifying themselves as failures. Interestingly, the one respondent who alluded to feelings of failure reported not following a direct plan of action after their withdrawal, instead, spending a long time reflecting on their decision and experiences. It is also important to note that three other respondents went on to withdraw from their new programme and in one scenario, the same respondent had been through three university programmes, withdrawing from all during the first year. This set of students may require particular supports and attention should be given to in-coming students who have already withdrawn from a previous programme, whether in UCD or elsewhere.

Respondents indicated their need to speak to someone within the university about the options available to them. This form of support is important in building a positive experience for student withdrawing, especially considering the importance placed by respondents on knowing their options and having an alternative plan in place. It is important, therefore, to ensure that students are aware that support is available and that what is on offer is oriented not necessarily to changing their mind, but rather, to guide them through the decision process and present the various options available in a way that is empowering for them. Student Advisors prioritised the need to inform students of their options and should they decide to withdraw, to help them plan accordingly. While other Support Staff, such as Student Supports (Tierney Building) identified the need for a more career oriented advisory role that would assist students in their withdrawal and provide them with career information. Evidence from the study indicated that respondents engaged in planning their next step while making the decision to leave, often without any consultation with university staff. This process of *looking ahead* when making the decision to withdraw can be used as a positive mechanism for presenting students their options within the UCD environment, in other institutions, and in terms of career planning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results from this research indicate that it is reasonable to agree with Georg (2009) that a '*bundle of influences*' combine to influence first year students' decision to withdraw from their programme and from UCD. This study identified two main groups: students, who are not academically prepared, make the wrong course choice, encounter academic and social difficulties in integrating into the university and become disengaged. The second group are students who fail to get the points required for their preferred course, continue through first year, succeed in passing their first year exams, reapply for their preferred course and withdraw prior to the commencement of second year. As apparent from discussions with respondents and UCD Support Staff, these groups can be further segregated into students that formally withdraw and those that leave the system without any form of notification to UCD staff. As recorded by Martinez, (2001) in the literature review, this creates difficulties for institutions in their attempts to locate a single reason why students withdraw. Though asked to identify the single factor contributing to reasons for withdrawal, respondents expressed difficulty in locating just one reason and instead outlined a trajectory of experiences and challenges that all combined to inform the decision to withdraw from their UCD programme.

This creates difficulties for institutions in their attempts to locate a single reason why students withdraw (Martinez, 2001). Similarly, though asked to identify the single factor contributing to reasons for withdrawal, most respondents in this study expressed difficulty in locating just one reasons and instead outlined a trajectory of experiences and challenges that all combined to inform the decision to withdraw from their UCD programme and from UCD itself.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Letter of Invitation and Interview Protocol for Exit Students

Letter of Invitation to Respondents



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Foirgneamh Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington
An Coláiste Ollscoile, Baile Átha Cliath
Belfield, Baile Átha Cliath 4, Éire

Dear XX,

I am Professor Suzanne Quin from the School of Applied Social Science in UCD and write to invite you to take part in a research study currently underway investigating why full time students exit from their degree programme in their first year. The aim of the study is to get a better understanding of the reasons why students leave and provide us with key information which will help us to improve support services provided to students. As part of this study, we are focusing on first year students that enrolled and exited in the 2008/2009 academic year. We understand that you exited from your degree programme during this year. If you agree to participate, we will conduct a telephone interview (which will take approximately 10/15 minutes) with you at a time that is most convenient for you. During the interview, we will ask you to reflect on these key areas:

- Why did you choose UCD and the particular degree programme;
- Your initial experiences in UCD and in your degree programme and whether or not your expectations were met at this time;
- Making the decision to leave your degree programme – what took place during this time and who was involved. Leaving your degree programme/university – what took place and who was involved.
- We also want to seek your views on what improvements can be made in the provision of support to students – when students are choosing a course, when making the decision to leave or stay, and how best to support students that choose to leave.

The interview tapes and transcription will be stored securely and will be destroyed on completion of the study. No individual will be identifiable in the results which will be written up for use within the University to improve student supports and for academic publication to increase knowledge of why students choose to leave their course before completion. There are no direct benefits for you personally to take part but what you say will contribute to our understanding of why students withdraw from their chosen courses and the kind of supports they received and/or recommend to help them in this decision. The risks are that it may raise some difficult issues that you had to address at that time.

You will be contacted by a researcher from the research team over the next week to confirm whether or not you are interested in taking part. Participation is not obligatory; however, if you choose to take part, everything you say will be treated confidentially and you can choose to opt out at any time before or during the interview if you wish. You can find out more about this study at (name of project webpage); however, should you have any further queries on this study, please contact _____. When completed, a summary of the results of the study will be available on this website

Yours sincerely,

Professor Suzanne Quin

Interview Protocol for Exit Students

Thanks for agreeing to take part in this interview. As we mentioned briefly in the letter that you received, we are interested in finding out why students leave UCD before completing (completion of) their degree. The aim of the study is to get a better understanding of the reasons why students leave and provide us with key information which will help us to improve support services provided to students.

I want to focus specifically on your course experiences, the contributing factors in your decision to leave the course and the supports you may have received around this time. If you completed more than one course, I want to focus specifically on the most recent course.

You do not have to answer any question if you wish not to do so and are free to stop this interview at any time. If you participate but find this interview distressing, you can ask me to arrange follow-up contact for you with a Student Advisor or a member of the Registrar's Office if you think this would be of help.

Interviews will be recorded and transcribed but any identifying information will be changed to assure anonymity.

Have any of you got any questions or issues that you would like clarification on before we begin?

Do I have your permission to turn on the recording device now?

Can I confirm that you agree to participate in this interview and are aware that you do not need to answer any question and can stop the interview at any time?

Introductory Questions

I just want to start by asking you a few basic questions.

1. When did you attend UCD?
2. Did you commence in UCD immediately after your Leaving Certificate?
3. When you were in UCD, did you live at home?
 - a. If so, how long was your commute? If not, where did you live?

Making the decision to attend UCD

4. Why did you apply to UCD?
 - a. What did you know about UCD before you started?
 - b. Had you any experience of UCD before you started there?

Prompt: attended open days/career guidance/information sessions/ know others who were on and/or had completed this course?

5. What course did you take in UCD? Was this your first course?
6. Was this course your first preference on your CAO form? If not, can you remember what was your first course and where? Can you remember where you put this course in your list of CAO preferences?
7. What was it about this course that made you apply for it?
 - a. What did you know about the course before you started?
 - b. Where did you get information about the course?

Prompt: attended open days/career guidance/information sessions/ had friends/family members already in UCD?

8. In hindsight, was this the right course for you?

Initial period in UCD and the course – student expectations and experiences

I want to talk now about your initial experiences in UCD and whether or not they met your expectations.

9. What did you think UCD would be like? What did it turn out to be like in reality?
10. Do you feel that UCD provided a supportive environment to you as a new student at this time? Is there anything you would have liked to have been different for you at this time?

Prompts: Student Advisor, Peer Mentors, student helpdesk, induction, orientation, academic and administrative staff.

11. Thinking about your course, what did you think the course would be like? What did it turn out to be like? Is there anything that you would have liked to have been different for you at this time?

Prompts: content, workload, structure, level of difficulty, the way the course was taught, way the course was assessed?

Making the decision to leave University – Process and who involved

I want to talk now about the decision to leave university and how this came about.

12. What was it that made you think about leaving? Thinking about these contributing factors, which of these were most important or contributed most to your decision to leave?
13. When you were thinking about leaving at this stage, who did you talk to?

Prompts: Student Advisor, admin staff, Peer Mentors, access and disability support, friends, family

14. Were there different responses from different people? Of these, who was most supportive to you at this time?
15. Is there anything that would have been helpful around this time that might have changed your mind about leaving?

Leaving University – Process

I now want to talk about the time when you had actually made your mind up fully about leaving.

16. Can you describe for me what process if any you went through when you were actually leaving? *Prompt:* Did you complete a student exit form?
17. In hindsight, do you think that the decision to leave was the right decision for you at the time?
18. Since leaving UCD, which if any of the following have you done: i) repeat the Leaving Certificate; ii) a similar course in a different institution, iii) a different course in UCD or, iv) chosen the employment route?
19. If you did not take up a different course in UCD, do you have any plans to return to UCD as a student?

Recommendations for improvement of support provision to students

20. In your opinion, what recommendations do you have for UCD in the support they provide for students who are thinking about leaving?
21. Overall, based on your experience, what do you think would be helpful for students to think about when (a) choosing a course, (b) making a decision to leave or to stay, (c) if the latter, how to make it as positive as possible.

Appendix 2 – Letter of Invitation, Consent Form and Focus Group Protocol for UCD Support Staff and Peer Mentors



UCD School of Applied
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Dear XX,

Date

I am Professor Suzanne Quin from the School of Applied Social Science in UCD and write to invite you to take part in a research study currently underway investigating why full time students exit from their degree programme in their first year. The aim of the study is to get a better understanding of the reasons why students leave and provide us with key information which will help us to improve support services provided to students.

As part of this study, we are focusing on groups of students and staff who come into contact with students who withdraw from their course in their first year. We would like to get your views on why students withdraw in their first year and what improvements can be made in the provision of support to such students when they are making the decision to leave/stay as well as how best to support students that choose to leave. The focus groups will comprise of 6-8 participants who are your student/staff peers. The questions will be concerned with your experiences of providing support to students in general as well as supporting those who are considering withdrawal. Based on such experiences, we would like to get your views on how best to support students who withdraw at all stages in this process.

Before the outset of the focus group, your consent will be sought to audiotape the discussions. Should any one individual object, the group facilitator will take notes of the comments made during the focus group. The interview tapes/notes will be stored securely and will be destroyed on completion of the study. No individual will be identifiable in the results which will be written up for use within the University to improve student supports and for academic publication to increase knowledge of why students choose to leave their course before completion.

There are no direct benefits for you personally to take part but what you say will contribute to our understanding of why students withdraw from their chosen courses and the kind of supports they received and/or recommend to help them in this decision. The risks are that it may raise some difficult issues that you had to address with a student in this situation. Should this arise, you will be offered support to deal with this on your request. You will be contacted by a researcher from the research team over the next week to confirm whether or not you are interested in taking part. Participation is not obligatory; however, if you choose to take part, you cannot withdraw your agreement to participate after the focus group has taken place. You can find out more about this study at (name of project webpage); however, should you have any further queries on this study, please contact _____. When completed, a summary of the results of the study will be available on this website

Yours sincerely,

Professor Suzanne Quin

Focus Group Protocol for UCD Support Staff and Peer Mentors

Thanks for agreeing to take part in this focus group. Our study is interested in finding out why first year students are exiting from their programme and in some cases, from UCD altogether. We are specifically concerned with students who withdraw, rather than fail their exams, and students who pass their exams yet do not proceed to 2nd year. The overall aim of the study is to gain a better understanding on why students drop out and to identify ways in which support mechanisms within UCD can be improved to support students. Interviews will be recorded, transcribed and any identifying information will be removed to assure anonymity. Of course, you do not have to answer any question you do not want to and everything you say is confidential, as is anything that is said by anyone during this focus group.

Introductory questions

1. What programme are you attached to, if any, in UCD?
2. Can you describe briefly what you do in your role as a support provider?
 - a. Within this role, what is your level of contact with first year students?

Experiences in providing support to students in general

3. From your perspective, what are the challenges that first year students face in adjusting to i) their programme and ii) to UCD?
 - a. *Prompts:* choosing courses, social integration, programme structure/content, workload, commute, accessing supports, financial challenges
 - b. How often do you come across these student challenges in your role and what support/advice do you provide to students experiencing these challenges?
4. What other supports services are in place to help first year students overcome these challenges?
 - a. What level of contact do you have with these support services provided to first year students?
 - b. From the perspective of your role, what improvements, if any, can be made to these support services to help students overcome challenges they face in i) adjusting to their programme and ii) adjusting to UCD?

- c. What improvements can be made to your own role in helping students overcome these challenges in i) adjusting to their programme and ii) adjusting to UCD?

Experiences in providing support to students who are thinking about leaving

5. How much contact do you have in your role with students who specifically express thoughts about leaving their programme and about leaving university?
 - a. What response (advice) do you provide to these students who are thinking about leaving their programme/university and from your experience, how do students respond to the advice/support that is provided to them?
 - c. At what stage in the decision process do students get in touch with you? What are their main concerns at this stage?
6. From your experience with these students/in your opinion, what do you think are the main reasons why first year students withdraw from their programme:
 - d. Prior to their first year exams?
 - e. Following completion of their first year exams? Why in your opinion, do these students not proceed to the second year of their programme?

We're interested in finding out about the perception of student withdrawal in UCD.

- f. In your opinion, how do you think these students themselves perceive their decision to leave?
 - g. What is the general perception of the 'decision to leave' i) in your support service and ii) other support services?
7. Within your role, what supports can be provided to students who are i) thinking about leaving and ii) who have actually left?

Recommendations

8. How can your role be improved to facilitate students who are thinking about leaving their programme/UCD?
9. In your opinion, what recommendations do you have for UCD in the support they provide for students who are thinking about leaving?

10. Overall, based on your experience, what do you think would be helpful for students to think about when (a) choosing a course, (b) making a decision to leave or to stay, (c) if the latter, how to make it as positive as possible.



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A research study into the reasons why students withdraw from the first year of their programme and UCD

Consent form for participation in a focus group.

I am willing to participate in a focus group to discuss students who withdraw from their degree programme in their first year.

I understand that the focus group discussion will be tape recorded and that this tape will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in UCD and will be safely destroyed at the end of the project.

I will take part in the focus group on the basis that all information is treated in a confidential manner and that no individual will be identifiable in the study findings.

I understand that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time during or before the focus group.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Name (please print): _____

Contact Phone Number: _____

Contact Email address: _____

